LI CHUN

Not That Road

AND OTHER STORIES

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Not That Road

1

When Chang Shuan decided to sell his land, it was the talk of the village.

Chang could have led quite a well-to-do life. With a family of four, he had received more than ten *mou* of land in the land reform. If he had set to and cultivated his land properly he could have raised quite enough for his family. But he would go in for trading draught animals! First he bartered his good chestnut ox for a young donkey, which couldn't haul his plough and had to be sold after less than ten days. He lost about two hundred thousand yuan[1] on that deal. With the money he had left he couldn't even buy a calf.

"Chang Shuan," said one of the village government officials sympathetically, "be careful, or you'll burn your fingers again. As the saying goes, 'You can be too clever by half! Try to cut a long gown longer and you'll only get a lined jacket!' " But Chang Shuan took no heed. He borrowed a million yuan from his sister-in-law's husband and bought two old oxen from Chouchiakou. As ill luck would have it, the wheat got frosted, there was a poor harvest, and he could find no buyers for his oxen. He

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[1] The currency used at that time was the old *Jenminpi* (people's money). On March 1955 this was replaced by new currency notes valued at one new yuan for 10,000 old yuan.

had to borrow fodder to feed his animals and did not manage to sell them until it was time to plough. On that deal, he lost the price of a donkey and was left owing several hundred thousand yuan to his sister-in-law's husband.

"Go a-borrowing, go a-sorrowing, a debt is like a sticking plaster on your back!" Chang Shuan's was a small peasant household. No matter how hard he worked, he couldn't earn enough to make good his losses. His sister-in-law's husband came by every day to press for his money, and a family squabble broke out. Getting no sympathy from his relative and annoyed by his importuning, Chang Shuan impetuously decided, "I'll have to sell that plot of land at Ikanchi! There'll be no trouble finding a buyer for a fine bit of land like that!"

This triangular-shaped holding of his was some of the best land in the village. Watered by a stream, it gave two good harvests a year, and was considered a great prize by the villagers. What prompted Chang to pick that particular piece for sale was, first, that it would be easy to find a buyer; and secondly, he stood to get more than a million yuan for it. After paying his debt, he hoped that he'd have a bit in hand which he could turn to good account in some way, maybe by a spot of trading. He hadn't been able to get the best out of that land and, in fact, he was really piqued by the low returns it had given him for all his efforts.

As soon as they knew of Chang's decision to sell, the villagers began speculating on who would buy the land. One named this family, another that. But nobody could tell for sure. There were certainly several families who were leading a very much better life since the liberation, but they were hardly able yet to think of buying land.

Two middle peasant households, though probably rich enough to buy land, would as often as not complain, in the canny way the well-to-do did in the old days, that they weren't half as well off as others thought them to be. The locals were pretty sure they wouldn't parade their wealth by buying land so soon after land reform. At last general opinion settled on Sung Lao-ting. It was common knowledge that Sung had been doing well these past two years. His second son, Tung-lin, was now a carpenter in the city and was regularly sending him money, several hundred thousand yuan each month. Besides, Sung himself had often said he would like to get a few more *mou*. But then again there were those who doubted whether Sung would actually buy land, because his first son, Tung-shan, was a Communist.

2

"The people's eyes are keen." That is indeed a true saying. Sung Lao-ting had already received eight registered letters this year from Tung-lin, each with a money order inside. But he was bent on saving up every last copper. His feet had never known machine-made socks, but he could not bear to part with any of his new savings to buy even a single pair. When there was a chance of getting some extra bean cake fertilizer this spring, his son, Tung-shan, tried hard to get him to lay out some money for it, but he refused. On another occasion, the mutual-aid team wanted to sink a well in the hollow below the village; Tung-shan tried to get some money from him to finance the project, but again the answer was "no". Lao-ting said, abruptly, "I've use for this money and you'll

know what for later." Tung-shan decided that he shouldn't press his father too far, but now he was becoming certain that the stubborn old man was seriously thinking of buying land.

When he heard that Chang Shuan was going to sell that land at Ikanchi, Sung Lao-ting felt a surge of excitement go through him. He had felt just that way when he first saw the sedan-chair of his bride approaching the gate of the farm. It would never do to let on in public that he was going to buy land. Times had changed; people looked askance at a buyer of land. He made sly enquiries here and there to discover how things were. Then one day at breakfast, he called Tung-shan over to him with due solemnity and said with unconcealed pleasure, "I hear Chang Shuan has decided to sell his land. How does the matter stand now?"

"He's not going to sell," Tung-shan replied laconically.

Lao-ting was silenced for the moment, and Tung-shan, carrying his chopsticks and bowl, strode out.

That evening, Tung-shan came back rather late. His father was puffing hard at his pipe. His mother was dozing in her seat.

Seeing his son, Lao-ting asked, "Somebody from the district government was looking for you, did you meet him?"

"Yes." Tung-shan was going to say more, but just couldn't find the right words. Lao-ting on his part was seeking a chance to re-open the question of buying the land. But it looked as though Tung-shan was out of humour; a young man could only be brought around by patient persuasion.

The place was silent, as if there weren't a single soul in the house. Finally Lao-ting broke the ice. He cleared

his throat, speaking at first somewhat hesitantly, and then in a rush, "I saw Wang Lao-san today; he told me that Chang Shuan was really going to sell his land at Ikanchi. I know that piece of land like the palm of my hand. It's good black earth. After a downpour, it's even richer than fertilized soil." Pausing, and drawing deeply at his pipe, he went on, "Chang Shuan got it during the land reform. I was wondering why we didn't get it. But as you were a village official, of course we couldn't quarrel with him over it. Now, since he's going to sell it, we can't afford to lose this chance." Looking intently at Tung-shan's face, he added, "What's the good of being a farmer if you haven't got a few *mou* of land?"

Tung-shan had anticipated all this and had a proper answer ready, but Lao-ting sighed and went on, "What do I want with money? All I've done and thought about has been for you and your brother. But I can't be looking after you all your lives."

"Chang Shuan is not going to sell his land now," said Tung-shan. "Don't you listen to Wang Lao-san's nonsense."

"Not going to sell?" Lao-ting smiled back complacently. "And who's going to pay that huge debt for him?"

"It isn't a very big one," Tung-shan rejoined. "I had a talk with Chang Shuan this afternoon. I told him it wasn't the right way out to sell that land. He doesn't have thirty or fifty *mou.* He only has those ten odd. What will he do if he sells? We were all poor peasants once, before the liberation. Now he's in trouble, we should give him a helping hand. How can we buy his land off him?" The old man lost patience. He had heard bits of village talk, "Tung-shan's a member of the Communist Party; so he can't buy land or lend out loans at high

interest." He thought perhaps his son was against buying the land for fear of criticism from his fellow villagers, so he exclaimed in a passion, "Why can't we buy his land? If others can, why can't we? He sells his land and we buy it, and we're all satisfied. What's wrong with that? We're not cheating him!" Unprepared for this bitter outburst, Tung-shan, much disturbed, remonstrated, "Father, how can you talk that way? It's true that Chang Shuan's willing to sell his land, but there's no real need to sell it! He's just a bit short of ready cash. We can't let him go bankrupt. I've promised to lend him five hundred thousand yuan. . . ."

Before he could finish, in a voice of hardly suppressed wrath, Lao-ting, his eyes blazing, cut in. "You promised him," he exclaimed. "When did you promise him?"

"This afternoon!"

Lao-ting jumped to his feet. His face reddened with anger and the veins stood out thick on his neck. "That money was earned by *Tung-lin,* not by *you*!" he spluttered. "You promised to lend it to him! Well, why don't you lend me to him? Why don't you lend your mother to him?" And throwing on his clothes, he stamped off in a fury.

Tung-shan's mother was awakened by the noise of the quarrel. "Your sister's baby is on the way," she complained. "I've tried to get money from him times out of number. You know there's a lot we've got to buy for her now. But he won't give me a copper! All he wants is to buy that land. What's the use of your quarrelling with him?"

The quarrel between father and son sent Hsiu-lan, Tung-shan's wife, running back and forth. First, she went to the threshing floor to soothe her father-in-law and try to persuade him to return home. But the old man said coldly, "No, I won't. I'll stay here a while." And then he added cannily, "Don't create such a fuss; every one will hear!"

Then Hsiu-lan hurried home and found Tung-shan lying on the bed, fuming.

"Angry?" she asked, grinning and taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

"I've got nothing to be angry about!" Tung-shan pretended to be undisturbed. But Hsiu-lan was not to be put off. "Don't you know what father has planned? He's thought everything out. If he wants to, let him buy the land for your younger brother. Why trouble to poke your nose into the matter?" At that, Tung-shan immediately sat bolt upright: "How can you talk like that? It's not a question of who is going to buy the land. The point is that we can't let Chang Shuan sell his land. How could he manage to get along without it? We can't settle things like this in the old way. I've got my principles. I can't be a Communist in name only! Even as it is I know I've not acted as I should." He added, his voice lower, "Just before the harvest, I passed by Chang Shuan's field. His wheat was short and limp like wet incense sticks; I felt bad about it. We're all poor peasants, but I've not helped him, though I know he's not good at farming. I've heard people on their way to the fair gossiping when they pass by Chang's field, 'Look at the wheat here, just a

waste of seed!' I felt as though some one had slapped me across the face. But according to you, I should only look after myself. I'm ashamed of you, and you a Youth League member!"

"Well! Well!" Hsiu-lan retorted, a bit sarcastically. "What an eloquent speaker you are with only me for an audience! But why did you keep silent when you were with your father? Since you've so much to say, why didn't you say it to father's face?"

"He didn't give me a chance," said Tung-shan, with a grimace. "What can I do about it?"

"You know, Tung-shan," Hsiu-lan said, trying to look stern, "I've got to criticize you: you've not really tried to talk to him. You're father and son, but you two have never had a real heart-to-heart talk. At mealtimes you take up your food and go out to your friends. And when the meal is over you slip on your coat and go to the township government. You're a Party member, he's a peasant, yet you have little to do with each other. Now you want to force your ideas on him, and it's only natural that he's quarrelled with you!"

"So you're giving me a lecture?" smiled Tung-shan, a little ironically, but in his heart of hearts he felt his wife's words were reasonable enough.

Hsiu-lan was going to say more, but Lao-ting's footsteps sounded in the courtyard. Tung-shan hastily motioned her to say no more, and Hsiu-lan stopped speaking. After the old man had entered the house, Tung-shan listened intently to the voices coming from the inner room. His mother said something which he could not catch, but then the old man shouted at the top of his voice, "If he's got enough money, let him lend what he likes. He can lend him a whole kingdom if he wants to. I don't

care!" Hsiu-lan gave Tung-shan a nudge and whispered with a giggle, "He wants you to hear it!"

4

The sun put his rosy face over the horizon. It was quiet in the village. The only sound was the distant shouts of the cowherds, drifting in from the fields.

Sung Lao-ting did not go to the fields that day. He hadn't slept a wink all night. Tossing on his bed, he could think of only one thing — how to buy that land. So he got up early and went straight to Wang Lao-san's home.

Before the liberation, Wang Lao-san had been a landlord's accountant. Dashing here, there and everywhere in the village, he was full of self importance — thinking of himself as some sort of "middleman" arranging deals in land. The villagers hadn't paid much attention to him for the past few years, but he did all he could to curry favour with them. When he ran into any village officials, he'd rack his brains thinking up high-sounding "progressive terminology" to use. In pre-liberation days, Sung Lao-ting was the very last person that he'd dream of currying favour with. But now, seeing Tung-shan enjoying great prestige among the villagers, Wang Lao-san tried to be specially cordial to Lao-ting. Sung had taken counsel with him about buying Chang Shuan's land, and Wang enthusiastically proffered his help, running around officiously, trying to arrange the matter.

Now he hurried out to meet Lao-ting as soon as the latter opened his gate. "Greetings, brother! I was going to look you up yesterday. I think there's real hope of success in this matter of Chang Shuan's land."

"They say now that he's not going to sell it," Lao-ting muttered slowly. But Wang Lao-san declared confidently:

"Oh, it doesn't matter if it has to be postponed a day or two. I'll take care of the whole thing. He did have the idea of borrowing some money instead of selling the land, but I said to him, 'No need to fool around. Since you've got to sell it, sell it outright. You'll save yourself a lot of trouble. If you borrow money, you've got to pay it back sooner or later.' After I told him that, he changed his mind again." Then, whispering into Lao-ting's ear, he added, "Don't you worry. I guarantee you'll get that land. It's really a good bargain. A year's wheat crop will bring back more than half your investment."

Lao-ting suddenly felt annoyed at Wang Lao-san's oily manner. He said, "If Chang Shuan doesn't want to sell, I won't force him to."

Wang Lao-san tapped him on the shoulder. "Brother, this is a rare chance indeed. Don't let it slip! You have twenty *mou* of land already: better get ten more. If you can afford to hire a labourer, then get one . . . ! You've worked hard enough all your life," he added with a smirk, "it's high time for you to sit back and take a rest."

While listening to him, Lao-ting hung his head in silence. There was a buzzing in his ears. His temples throbbed. He was thinking, "Am I really going to hire a labourer? I was a labourer myself for eighteen years, and what a life I led!"

On his way home, he recalled how in the old days Wang Lao-san used to run around trying to buy land for the landlord and do the peasants down. He also remembered how, during the harvest, when he was working for the Chus, Wang Lao-san, sporting a fan, used to come down with the landlord Chu to watch him work,

sweating in the fields. He spat bitterly, "To hell with you, Wang Lao-san! You miserable toad-eater!"

He walked slowly till he came to his threshing floor. He paced to and fro. A row of wheat stacks appeared in his mind's eye. He looked now at one, now at another. Taking mental measure of each stack, his thoughts raced on. "If I can buy that piece of land from Chang Shuan, well, we'll see whose stack will be biggest next summer!" His imagination took wings: he saw his stacks growing bigger and bigger, a group of labourers working busily on his own threshing floor . . . while Chang Shuan's stacks dwindled and dwindled until they were just a few shocks of wheat. Suddenly he thought of Chang's children. He could actually see them, skinny and pale. They were running towards him. . . . He turned hurriedly and made his way towards the house.

Hsiu-lan and her mother-in-law were cooking pancakes in the kitchen. They were talking animatedly. Lao-ting heard his daughter-in-law say, "Father hasn't changed a bit. He's got the same old ideas. . . ." Lao-ting stopped short, cocking his head to one side and listening attentively.

"He's well on in years now; it's only for your sake that he's troubling himself," rejoined the old woman. And Hsiu-lan replied with a laugh, "There's no need for that. We're in the mutual-aid team now; and next year we'll have a co-op, and we'll be members of that, too. We'll have machines to plough the land, so there's no cause to worry about the future." Lao-ting was thoroughly incensed, his beard bristling. He already had a mulish son, and now he found he had a daughter-in-law who was just as bad!

At the midday meal, Hsiu-lan put the dishes on the table. But Lao-ting turned away his head in anger. "Father, it'll be cold. Do start!" urged Hsiu-lan. But he took no notice. Suddenly he pushed away from the table and, in an outburst of anger, exclaimed to his wife, "I'm not going to eat here. I'll go to the market and have a meat dinner." Grasping a few pancakes in his hand, he stalked out, throwing over his shoulder as he went, "Why should I worry about saving? I've worked and slaved like a horse, and what do I get in return — just abuse!" He glared at Hsiu-lan. Hsiu-lan turned her face to the wall, but she couldn't help smiling.

Lao-ting did go to the market, but he didn't order any meat, only a bowl of bean-curd with flatcakes.

5

Lao-ting and his son Tung-shan quarrelled in a strange sort of way. The more resentment they harboured, the harder they would work, keeping mute as fish. If they had to sow seed together, one led the ox, the other helped to drop the seed, but they wouldn't exchange a single word to each other more than was absolutely necessary.

Once, the previous spring, they had quarrelled, because although he knew Lao-ting didn't like the cart to be lent out, Tung-shan had obliged a neighbour with the loan of it. That time they hadn't talked to each other for a good ten days. This time it would be a fortnight at least, and drat him if he talked again, thought Lao-ting.

A day or so later, however, as dusk fell, while Lao-ting was feeding the cow, Tung-shan came back from a Party branch meeting. Trying to ignore his son, Lao-ting pretended to be very busy mixing the fodder. When he least

expected it, however, his son spoke directly to him: "Father, don't you think it would be good to plant green peas in the field once the grain crops have been taken in?" Looking up and finding his son with a beaming face, though with a lingering air of diffidence, he knew he had come to make peace. He took it that Tung-shan had decided it was all right to buy the land, so he agreed. "All right," he said. "It's good for the field to have a change." So saying, he took a seat on the stone in the courtyard, deciding to sound his son out there and then on the question of the land. He started falteringly: "You're still young. There's nothing like having a few *mou* of land to call your own. The earth is the source of all good. If I don't buy another eight or ten *mou* of land for you brothers before my death, I won't rest in peace! Don't be afraid. I'll bear the brunt of the gossip, if there is any, but I'm sure no one's going to say anything against it. We can't go on for ever eating the poor stuff we do now. We'll eat better, far better, I can tell you, if we only have just a few more *mou*." He emphasized the sentence with a flourish of his hand, "We'll have more wheat than we can put in the barn."

"We're not short of grain," replied Tung-shan, squatting on the ground.

"No, we're not. But we've little to spare!"

Seeing his father still set on his old idea, Tung-shan shifted the conversation to the problem of crops. "How much do you think," he asked, with a smile, "we can get from those four *mou* of land over east this year?" After a moment's careful thought, Lao-ting replied, "At least thirteen hundred catties."

Well knowing that his father had a keen eye for the rich crops of others, Tung-shan said, "On Lin Wang's

land, each *mou* gives five hundred catties. Their nineteen *mou* of land are much better cultivated than ours."

Lao-ting's pride was a bit hurt, so he argued, "If you don't spare the fertilizer, well, of course, you get richer crops. Land is what you make it."

Tung-shan quickly cut in. "Right you are! But we didn't put in enough manure. If we had spent some money on good manure this spring, we should be harvesting three or four hundred more catties of grain!" Not to be diverted by his son's talk about buying manure, Lao-ting tried to get back to his original topic. "Manure alone," he said, "is not enough. The quality of soil has to be reckoned with too. Lin Wang's land was originally ours, so I know all about it. It's black earth all through, good enough to plant seedlings in without any manure." Finding the trend of conversation to his advantage, Tung-shan gave it a further twist by putting in, "Then why did we sell it to the landlord Ho?" There was a note of sharpness in his tone.

Lao-ting looked into the face of his son, and sighed. "You can't blame your father. I tremble again all over just thinking about it. It was in 1943. We had two crop failures one after another. Then, as bad luck would have it, your mother fell ill with some women's complaint. I had just been sacked by the landlord Chu. I had to get money to buy medicine for your mother, so there was nothing for it but to try carting around coal for sale. You were only a child then. Do you know how it was that your younger sister died? Your mother was so ill she couldn't feed her, so I had to carry her from house to house every day to get a drop of milk from other mothers. I thought of getting your grandmother to come over and help, but we didn't have enough food in the house for ourselves. I had to cook and take care of your mother. At the same time, I had to be out on the road carting coal first thing in the morning. I was too busy to look after the child properly. Your younger sister died of sheer starvation!"

Lao-ting's eyes grew dim with tears at that bitter memory. He paused, and gritted his teeth. Then he resumed: "By the time your mother recovered, we were up to our ears in debt. In the winter we borrowed half a bushel of wheat from the landlord, and had to return a whole bushel to him in the summer. That was when we sold the four *mou* of land to Ho. I can't remember how much I got out of it. I know it was only just enough to cover the debt for the medicine." With bent head he went on. "That same year I sent you to learn to be a copper-smith; you were only thirteen then." He stole a glance at Tung-shan's face on which the imprint of deep lines told how he had suffered in his childhood.

"Didn't anybody try to help us?" asked Tung-shan, deliberately.

"Help? Why, our neighbours were as poor as ourselves. The rich made money out of our misery. The local government just ground down the poor. Those officials were only interested in crushing our bones to powder." He stopped for a moment, overcome by emotion. Then he added, "Nothing like we have today. . . ."

Reading his father's inner thoughts, Tung-shan gave a sigh. Then he said slowly, "Chang Shuan is in trouble now, as we were then! But if we faced the same difficulties today," he added, as if thinking aloud, "we shouldn't be forced to sell our land. If you're honest and hard-working, and get bogged down in troubles, the government and the people will certainly come to your aid.

Nowadays we want everybody to prosper, and see that no family's ruined."

Lao-ting, his temples throbbing and his thoughts whirling like the Yellow River in spate, said not a word.

Seeing the expression on his father's face, Tung-shan slowly went on, "Father, in the past, the only regret the landlord had was that the poor weren't poor enough. Nowadays we ought to help one another. You've known what poverty meant! We can't behave like landlords!"

Lao-ting remained silent.

6

It was autumn. The persimmon trees wove their thick foliage into a green curtain. Green persimmons hung on the slender branches.

Sung Lao-ting took off one of his shoes and sat on the high embankment under the persimmons. He looked at the sky: it was blue and cloudless. He gazed about him: the autumn crops were in full growth. Especially striking was the sorghum, whose heavy ears were spread out and glistened like pearls.

"If it's properly cultivated, one *mou* of land can give as much as two," he said to himself. Then the same old thoughts which had haunted him all this time came back to him again.

He still thought it best to buy a few more *mou,* no matter what others might say. When the time came for Tung-lin and Tung-shan to divide up the property, each would get some twenty *mou.* That would be fine indeed! he thought. And when his grandchildren spoke about the matter, they would say, "It was our grandfather who bought all this land for us!" They'd know that their

grandfather was a "property buyer". He remembered what Wang Lao-san had said, too: "A year's wheat crop will cover more than half your investment." Land is a thing you can't have too much of! And there was that piece of land at Ikanchi, the best piece of land in the whole village! It was sheer foolishness to miss the chance! And, thinking thus, he stood up and went straight off to Ikanchi.

Chang Shuan had been planning to sow wheat on that plot again. It was almost time for sowing, but the land had not yet had its second ploughing. Weeds ran riot in it. Surveying this sorry sight, Lao-ting heaved a deep sigh.

The rich black soil gripped his attention. He scooped up a handful of earth from the field, crumbling it between his fingers. "I've got to buy this land!" So saying, he threw a quick glance around, and seeing no one about, paced the edge of the field, intending to measure the sides and see if it really was all but two and a half *mou.*

He started from one corner, stepping very carefully. But as he turned down the next side, he suddenly caught sight of a mound covered with hawthorn. It was the grave of Chang Shuan's father.

The sight of it properly upset him. He tried to avert his gaze, but his eyes kept straying back that way. He remembered what Chang Shuan's father had looked like. He had died a year before the liberation. He'd worked hard all his life, and when he died his family hadn't even six foot of land to bury him in. Chang Shuan had put his father's coffin to rest in a disused cave for two years. It was only after the land reform that Chang Shuan had been able to bury him here in this field. All this he knew quite well. And he remembered, too, what the old man had said to Chang Shuan on his deathbed: "Bury

these old bones of mine after we've got our own land. If you can't get any, then leave me unburied. I won't rest quiet on the edge of any landlord's field." And suddenly it all came back to him again — how he himself had suffered before the liberation. Sick at heart at these memories, he could hardly keep back his tears. He left off his pacing and made his way home.

At the edge of the village, he met Tsang Shan, an old man, wheeling two sacks half full of wheat. "Going to sell them at the fair?" he inquired. "No," Tsang Shan replied, smiling. "I'm going to lend them to Chang Shuan. He said he wanted to make some mats. I'm lending this to him so that he can sell it to the co-op and get some reeds in return."

"You had plenty of wheat this year then?" Lao-ting remarked.

"That's as may be," said the old man, "but enough for us, anyhow. No sense keeping all this at home. After all, I'm not going in for buying land!"

This last remark touched Lao-ting to the quick, and his face flushed. Tsang Shan then pushed on his barrow to the east of the village. Lao-ting scowled at his disappearing back. He had half a mind to overtake him and have it out with him, but he felt somehow that he was in the wrong, so he contented himself with shouting, "You've only a few coppers to your name and you're already giving yourself airs!"

7

After supper Lao-ting sat motionless in the courtyard. Everything was bathed in soft silvery moonlight. Crickets

were chirping under the trees. The many noises that struck his ears annoyed him. Now it was the chirping of the crickets, now it was the tinkling sound of dishes being washed up, now it was Hsiu-lan laughing and talking as she chattered away with her mother-in-law in the kitchen.

"What a mess!" he muttered irritably. Then he began to ponder over the events of the day, and became unconscious of the noises around him.

A man came in from the gate, calling, "Tung-shan!"

Lao-ting recognized the familiar voice of Chang Shuan, so he shouted back, "He's gone over to the township government." Then he stood up and added, "But come in and sit down a while." Chang Shuan, hearing that Tung-shan was out, replied hastily, "No, no, thank you," and hurried away as fast as his legs could carry him.

"That chap is as scared of me as if I were a wolf," thought Lao-ting as he got up and walked to his room. No sooner was he indoors than his wife asked, "Is Chang Shuan going to sell his land, or are you going to lend him that money?"

"Well, it's hard to come to a decision," he replied with a casual air.

Footsteps sounded in the courtyard again. He cupped his ear and listened. It was Tung-shan and Chang Shuan coming in. He could hear his son saying quietly, "Come and have a talk in my room." And the two of them went in together.

From where he stood, he could hear them whispering. Consumed with curiosity, he stole a glance at his wife and stealthily went out. His shoes made rather a noise so he took them off at the door. Standing barefooted beneath the window, he listened.

Chang Shuan was saying, "When you're driven into a corner, you're always at a loss to find the right way out. I felt properly helpless these last few days. I thought to myself, 'To cure a bad sore, don't be scared of cutting away your flesh.' What did I have to sell? Well, land, of course. And I thought to myself, 'What I have left doesn't amount to anything, anyhow.' I'll sell and have a bit of capital. If I go to Choukou and do a bit of trading, and if fortune favours me, I'll get my money back again, and perhaps more."

"What an idea!" — this was Tung-shan's voice — "You only think of getting a quick profit! That's not honest work. We're in a new society now. You'd better make mats for the next month or so and in future cultivate your land better. Don't you try trading in animals any more."

"Since we had that talk the other day, I've decided to take your advice and not to sell that land. I've made up my quarrel with the wife. Everything seems to have straightened itself out. If you don't have friends to talk things over with, you soon land yourself in trouble. It's you I've got to thank for persuading Uncle Tsang Shan to lend me those five bushels of wheat. 'Chang Shuan,' he said to me, 'don't take it to heart so! Every one gets into trouble once in a while.' And he brought the wheat to me on a wheelbarrow the very afternoon."

"Has the credit co-op agreed to lend you that two hundred thousand yuan?"

"The manager says it's all right. But they asked me to return the loan within three months. So I'll be only two or three hundred thousand short. I wonder if I can borrow some from you?"

Lao-ting held his breath, so intent was he to hear what Tung-shan's reply would be.

"My father still can't shake himself free from his old ideas," said his son. "He's over sixty, so I don't like to upset him. He's suffered all his life, and naturally he values the money he's saved. But don't worry. With the leadership of the Communist Party we can't let you sell your property and see your family in the street. I'm thinking of getting all the members of our team together and appealing to them to help you."

Lao-ting, listening under the window, said to himself, "He often seemed so cold, but he was really trying to protect me from annoyance." Then he heard Tung-shan say again, "Don't you worry. Uncle Tsang Shan will lend you some, the credit co-op will lend you some and I'm sure the rest of us will chip in. Then you can set about some work on the side that will bring you in something extra. I'll get somebody to put in a word for you with your sister-in-law's husband and persuade him to let you pay off the loan he gave in instalments. You'll tide things over all right!" he concluded cheerfully.

"Tung-shan," he heard Chang Shuan say with great animation, "don't you worry about villagers' gossip; all of us, young and old, know what sort of man you are. You're a good Communist, everyone has a good opinion of you. It's clear for all to see who's fair-minded and can really think for the people." Then he added in a lower voice, "We know your father's a bit queer-tempered and muddle-headed, but we won't take any notice." Although these words were uttered quite quietly, they fell particularly clearly on Lao-ting's ears.

"There have been some changes in my father, too, these last two years," Tung-shan pointed out. "You know I

had words with him when I decided to join the mutual-aid team. But now he works quite hard in the team himself. He doesn't harp so much on trifling things concerning his personal interests. I think it was wrong to be as hard on him as I was in the past. Take this affair of buying the land from you, for instance. After I had a talk with him yesterday, he spoke quite differently about it. He told me, 'We just can't buy that land of Chang Shuan's. I carted coal with his father for several years. We were all poor together once. We can't buy his land.' He's only afraid of people knowing he's got money enough to lend out." Tung-shan chuckled, while Chang Shuan broke in, "I know what sort of man Uncle Lao-ting is. He calls a spade a spade. He had to sell his land to the landlord in the past, so he must know what it means to part with one's land. My father used to say, 'Uncle Lao-ting and I will have to look after the land of others even after we're dead!' And then the Communist Party came. . . . If only my father were alive today. . . ."

Lao-ting could no longer contain his feelings. Holding back his tears, he went to his room and threw himself on the bed, where he lay like a log.

8

It was a morning in August; the air was clear and fresh as a river in autumn.

The fragrance of ripe crops was spread everywhere by the wind, caressing the smiling faces of the peasants and warming their hearts.

Early in the morning Sung Lao-ting went to look for Tung-shan to talk over the question of first sinking a well in the hollow and then, in the autumn, installing a water-wheel. As he walked along the raised edge of the sorghum field, he ran into Chang Shuan coming from the opposite direction. He wanted to talk to him, but Chang, hoping he hadn't been seen, made off into the midst of the sorghum.

"Chang Shuan, Chang Shuan," shouted Lao-ting at the top of his voice, "I've got something to talk to you about!"

Chang Shuan had to turn back. "Come to my place this afternoon," Lao-ting burst out. "I want to give you three hundred thousand yuan!"

"What! you mean you'll lend me all that?" asked Chang, wide-eyed with surprise.

"Do you think I'd refuse to lend it to you and keep it to buy land? But just you remember: From now on you must really work with a will! Otherwise, you'll not be doing justice to your friends." And having said that with great earnestness, Lao-ting walked on with firm steps towards the east where the red sun was rising.

October 2, 1953

Old Man Meng Kuang-tai

The Mengchiachai Agricultural Producers' Co-operative has two top-notch carters — Meng Kuang-tai and Meng Tien-hsiang.

These two, father and son, are both first-class hands at training draught animals. Meng Kuang-tai drove carts for a landlord before the liberation, and people say he could bring the biggest mule to its knees with one stroke of his whip. There was no animal, however vicious, that he couldn't break in inside of three months.

Tien-hsiang learned how to handle animals from his father while he was still a child. He gained further practical experience driving a rubber-tyred cart for the co-op, and today he is one of the best workers in all the five teams it has. Whenever a long trip has to be made, he's always one of those chosen. If he has a fault it's that he's too reserved. During the land reform he didn't open his mouth once at a meeting, but always got his father to go in his place. In fact, he was born tongue-tied, and hardly speaks a dozen sentences from one end of the year to the other. He walks with bent head, as though he were looking for something on the ground.

His father is just the opposite — a great talker with a hearty laugh, his voice clear as a bell. Tall and strongly built, at sixty his hearing is as good as ever and his eyesight unimpaired. He tackles a job with vigour. The first year he joined the co-op, he worked as a carter; later, because the co-op chairman noticed he was, after all,

growing rather stiff in the joints, he was shifted to tending the draught animals.

This job kept him busy all day, sweeping out the stables, setting things to rights, mending the harness and gathering together the manure. If the co-op bought a scrawny mare which no one else cared to look after, he would lead it to his stable, and in two months it would be sleek and strong. So the year before this, upon the recommendation of Kang Ta-cheng, the co-op chairman, he was elected head of the team in charge of draught animals.

Entrusted with this task, he worked harder than ever. The ten carters in the co-op loved him for the way he insisted that every beast should be well tended, well fed and watered, and saw to it that each carter was given ample fodder and grass to feed the animals on a trip. But if an animal came back hurt, that was a different story! No matter who you were, he'd give you a thorough blowing-up. "Haven't you got eyes? Or perhaps you've swallowed them?" Knowing how touchy he was, the carters were careful how they handled their beasts.

After the wheat harvest this year, on the day the crop was to be divided up, Tien-hsiang was dispatched with a cartload of farm produce to the supply and marketing co-operative. Because sunning the wheat was heavy work, and the crop was being distributed that day, the Mengs had vegetable dumplings and sweet pies for their midday meal.

"Keep some for Tien-hsiang," Kuang-tai reminded his daughter-in-law, as he sat eating pies beside his two grandchildren. "He may be back by nightfall."

But before the young woman could reply, his own wife rejoined: "We've already put several aside for him.

You're always on at us to keep something for Tien-hsiang — as if we'd forget him!"

Tien-hsiang's wife, hearing this, giggled in the kitchen.

"Well," said the old man, smiling, after a pause. "It's become a habit with me. You see, he's hard at it all day."

When Tien-hsiang's mother brought another dishful of pies from the kitchen, Ling-ling, her granddaughter, helped herself to two of them and made for the door.

"Why, you greedy little pig!" the old lady scolded. "Where are you going? Giving them to the other children again?"

"No, grannie. I shan't give them away."

"You stay right here!" Her grandmother tried to look stern.

"Oh, let her alone!" urged Kuang-tai.

But his wife launched into a long account of how, during the Dragon-Boat Festival, Ling-ling had gone out to play with a *tsungtzu*[1] in her hand and Little Chutzu had coaxed it out of her. She went on to describe how she had been to the supply and marketing co-op that morning to buy sugar, what good measure the woman there had given her, even adding a little extra in the end.

Old Kuang-tai had no patience with talk like this.

"Next time you go there," he said, "don't ask them for any extras. Just take your money's worth."

"It's a good thing we're not all like you!" grumbled his wife. "Remember the last time you bought a catty of oil? I could see at a glance it was less than a catty." She stopped for a moment to think. "This afternoon I'll

[1] Dumplings made by wrapping glutinous rice or millet in broad bamboo leaves and boiling them. They are eaten during the Dragon-Boat Festival.

go to the co-op and see that we get more of that good '438' wheat."

"The co-op will give us our due," retorted the old man gravely. "Don't go picking and choosing again this afternoon. You'd much better stay at home and clean the bin. The accountant will work out exactly how much of the best wheat we should get. If you're going to be as fussy as you were last year when they distributed fuel, I warn you — I'll stop doing anything around the house!"

"I won't go then!" flared up his wife. "I won't go! And I don't care if they give you a heap of cow dung!"

The old man shot his wife a disapproving glance. Then, shaking his head, he set off for the co-op.

When the wheat was distributed that afternoon, the Mengs got 2,200 catties. As sack after sack of the good grain was carried home, the old man sighed with content. It had been a grand year for the wheat. Never in his life had he seen so much grain carried to his house. After some mental arithmetic he decided to sell at least a thousand catties of wheat to the state. He remembered how the supply and marketing co-op had lent them fertilizer when they sowed this wheat and that the government was planning to set up a machine and tractor station in the village next year. . . . The more he thought of these things, the better he felt. As he took his seat for supper at home that evening, he suddenly asked his granddaughter: "Is my beard turning white?"

Ling-ling had a careful look.

"There's only a few white ones!" she replied.

The old man burst out laughing. Here was proof that he'd spend quite a few happy years in a socialist society.

Just then Tien-hsiang came slowly out of his room.

"How many times did you water the horse on the road?" asked the old man.

"Three times," muttered his son.

"When did you stop to feed it? Did it get enough fodder?"

The young man hesitated, then stammered: "Yes."

Kuang-tai was going to ask something more when his wife hastily interrupted from the kitchen: "There's no end to your questions. Now it's this, now that. Do you think he doesn't know how to feed his animal?"

Used to his son's way of talking, the old man did not press the subject. He told his daughter-in-law to bring out the sweet pies they had kept for Tien-hsiang, and informed him cheerfully: "We've got much more wheat than last year — six hundred catties more! There's been a fair distribution. The old members of the co-op didn't suffer, and the new ones are satisfied too. Even your third uncle has got 1,200 catties."

Tien-hsiang, sipping soup, neither commented nor smiled.

"You'd better go to the store this evening and buy yourself some white cloth," the old man continued in his measured way. "Look at your clothes. It's time you had a new suit. Buy some galoshes too. Carters can't do without them. I don't need any, because I don't leave the village."

"All right," replied Tien-hsiang briefly.

Kuang-tai remembered a meeting he had to attend. He stood up.

"This evening the co-op committee is holding a meeting to decide how to elect the labour heroes. Your team leader's spoken highly of you; perhaps you'll be elected."

Tien-hsiang bent his head ever lower and said nothing.

"Will the heroes be given prizes this year?" asked his mother eagerly.

"Of course," replied the old man. "We'll get double portions! But how is it your mind keeps running on things like that?" He broke into a loud laugh.

Old Meng Kuang-tai had been elected district labour hero the year before last, and this year he had been nominated labour hero of the co-op. So he had taken part in many labour hero meetings. But he had never been as happy as this time when his own son had been nominated. He was one of those people who would ten times rather hear their children praised than themselves.

Feeling a nip in the air, he went into his room to fetch his lined jacket. But two large bins of grain had been carried into the room in the afternoon, and everything was in disorder. Search as he might, he could not find the jacket. Tien-hsiang's was there, however, beside a bin. He decided to borrow it for the evening.

As he picked it up, he saw a small sack beneath.

He was taken aback, for the sack bore the name of the co-op. He hastily opened it, and found it half full of peas! Recognizing it as fodder for the co-op animals, he flared up at once.

Just at this moment his wife rushed in. "What are you turning everything upside down for?" she scolded. "You've left your lined jacket in the co-op."

She snatched the sack from his hands and put it in a dark corner.

Exasperated by her attempt to hide the peas, Kuang-tai hurried into the courtyard, grinding his teeth. He shook an accusing finger at Tien-hsiang.

"Where did that sack of peas come from?" he shouted.

Tien-hsiang only blinked and said nothing.

"Out with it! Where did it come from?"

Tien-hsiang paled and hung his head, not daring to utter a word.

The old lady hurried out to intervene.

"They're mine!" she cried. "I got them to feed the pigs."

"When did you get them? Where did you take them from?"

"I bought them!" She rushed up to him. "You're talking so loud that all the neighbours will hear." She longed to put her hand over his mouth.

"You . . . !" Kuang-tai glared at her, speechless with resentment. Then he banged on the table with his pipe and turned to his son. "A fine thing you've done, Tien-hsiang! You're going on for forty, yet you think I give you fodder for you to bring home! Pah! And they've nominated you a labour hero!"

Growing angrier every moment, he threw the jacket on the floor and stumped off to the co-op office.

The meeting had begun. The committee members were discussing the merits of the fourteen candidates nominated by the various teams during the harvest.

Sore at heart, the old man sat himself down in a corner. When the candidates of the second team were discussed, Meng Tien-hsiang's name was mentioned.

The old man suddenly stood up.

"Tien-hsiang won't do!" he declared.

Everyone looked round in amazement.

"Why not?" asked the leader of the second team. "During the harvest he carted wheat every day, loaded and unloaded the cart himself, and did whatever job he was given. He never asked for a day off and never complained. I think he's pretty well qualified."

"No. We can't have him!" Old Meng was very worked up.

The chairman of the co-op realized there must be something behind this. "Uncle Kuang-tai," he asked with a smile, "what shortcomings does Tien-hsiang have that disqualify him?"

A silence ensued. Dozens of eyes turned to Kuang-tai. His face was red with anger, his lips quivered. "He just isn't good enough" was all he could say. Then he walked out and made his way home.

"Where's Tien-hsiang?" he asked, stamping his foot, as soon as he crossed the threshold.

"I don't know," his wife replied coldly. Then she complained, "I see you won't rest in peace till you've hounded him to death. Have we so many sons, or is he our only one, I ask you? He'd toiled the whole day, yet you found fault with him the moment he got home!" She began to whimper. "Ah, Kuan-hsiang! Not a word from you since you were pressganged by the Kuomintang troops! If you were still alive, I'd have one son left after your father plagues your brother to death."

The old man's anger melted away. He sat listlessly in the courtyard, his eyes closed, thinking of Kuan-hsiang, his first-born. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

Since the moment his father left the house in such anger, Tien-hsiang's mind had been in a turmoil. His mother kept grumbling to herself. His wife was making a great clatter in the kitchen, as if to show she disapproved of him as well. He wanted to reason with his mother, but he couldn't bring himself to do that, and anyway he was a bad talker. So he went out without a word. Instead of going to his team to get his work-points for the day recorded, he wandered over to the

threshing ground and threw himself down on the straw, sighing and thinking.

The moon crept over the top of the elm tree. Not a soul was stirring near by. The night was as quiet as a stagnant pond.

The events of the evening crowded through his mind. . . .

He had just driven the cart back. As the co-op members were all busy getting their shares of wheat, no one was about to help him unload. His mother happened to pass by, and seeing a sack on the cart asked: "What's this?" "Fodder," he replied. "I was in a hurry to get home, so I didn't have time to feed the animal on the way." His mother lifted the sack to feel its weight, and took a look inside. "I'll take your jacket home for you," she said, and then wrapped the sack up inside his jacket. In a flurry, he opened his mouth several times to protest, but couldn't think what to say. Next thing he knew she was going off with the wrapped sack under her arm.

He gave a deep sigh. He felt like slapping his own cheeks and going to his mother to give her a piece of his mind. But then he remembered a different incident. It had happened a long time before.

It was also during the wheat harvest. On the day when the harvested wheat was to be divided between landlord and tenant, his father had haggled for hours with landlord Hu Sze. Finally it was decided that the landlord would get eight-tenths of the crop and the tenant the rest. He and his father had tilled sixty *mou* of the landlord's land. They had looked forward to the harvest all the year as they toiled in the fields, not sparing themselves. But now it was nearly all going to the landlord!

Dozens of sacks of wheat were carried to his house. He clearly remembered that when the last sacks were being carried away, it was already dark. The landlord's wife, who had been watching the work, went into the house to get a lantern. Tien-hsiang heard his mother's whispered call. She made a sign from the door of their hut. He threw a quick glance around and, gritting his teeth, shouldered a sack of wheat and stumbled with it quickly into the hut.

"Don't let your father know!" whispered his mother. "He's too honest with those thieves. If you tell him, we'll all go hungry."

After that he had seen her more than once take home sweet potatoes, maize and kidney-beans from the landlord's fields. Once she took a pumpkin. But that time she was discovered by the landlord. He cursed and swore at her, there on the dam, snatched her basket and dashed it to the ground. But with tears in her eyes, she picked up the little pumpkin and ran home. She boiled it and served it to the hungry family.

Those were bitter days indeed! Yes, he couldn't blame his mother. But who was to blame, then?

The threshing ground became darker. A few floating clouds stole over the sickle moon, and the stars seemed thicker and more brilliant.

Suddenly someone emerged from behind the wheat stack and came towards him. He was startled, then he saw it was his father.

"Tien-hsiang!" his father called out. "I've been looking for you for quite some time. Move up and let's have a talk." He sat down on the straw and sighed before he went on. "You know, Tien-hsiang," he began with difficulty, "what you've done isn't right. Didn't

your conscience prick you when you took the co-op fodder home? Isn't it all because of the co-op that we're living a decent life now? Anything that belongs to the co-op belongs to all the hundred families in it. Even this straw was nourished by the sweat of us all. So how can we touch anything here in the co-op that has not been given us as our share? It's not like the old society. We worked like beasts of burden for the landlords but all the fruits of our labour were snatched away by them. In our hatred, we sometimes thought of stealing some back. But now the co-op is our own; it's our family. This year, for instance, we've got plenty of wheat, haven't we? Is that the way to repay the co-op — stealing fodder from it? Won't you be ashamed to face your animal tomorrow?" He was a little angry, but he softened when he saw his son hang his head and his eyes moisten.

"I've told the co-op chairman everything," he said slowly after a pause. "If I'd kept it from the co-op, I'd have had no peace of mind. You mustn't blame me. I've put up with a lot to bring you up, and I'm glad that you've grown into a useful man. You're a good worker. I'm only afraid you've some wrong ideas that don't go with socialism. How can you think of stealing? What are you coming to?" He sighed again, angry with his son and sorry for him at the same time.

"Father, don't say any more." Tien-hsiang suddenly looked up. "I know I was wrong. I don't see how I can face people again." He buried his head in his hands.

"If you can admit your mistake and correct it, no harm will be done." The old man sighed once more. "A man may stumble, just as a horse may trip up. Don't be afraid of losing face. Go to the co-op and tell them the truth."

Before he could finish, Tien-hsiang had stood up.

"Tell me, Father," he asked, "what ought I to do now?"

"Send the peas back to the co-op. Yes, right away. Tell the whole story to the co-op chairman. Don't be afraid of losing face."

"I'll go at once!" Tien-hsiang hurried off to fetch the sack.

Looking after his son, the old man felt a surge of strong emotion. He heaved a deep sigh, which was followed by a smile.

Some wisps of cloud were scattered by the wind, to reveal the bright moon. The village was deep in sleep. The only house showing a light was the co-op office, where voices could still be heard.

Three days later, a meeting was held to celebrate the rich harvest and present prizes to the labour heroes. Early in the morning when gongs and drums were beaten, all the members of the co-op set out in their best clothes to the meeting place. Old men sat themselves down on the front benches, twisting their beards. Girls with neat long braids walked through the crowds, to see and to be seen.

Kang Ta-cheng opened the meeting with a report on the wheat harvest, and then read out the names of the fourteen labour heroes. Each name was greeted by thunderous applause. The last name on the list was Meng Tien-hsiang. "Here I've got to explain," said Kang. "Not long ago Tien-hsiang did something wrong. But the committee has considered his case. Since he has frankly admitted his mistake and corrected it, and since he has worked hard all along, we decided to elect him all the same. Now let Tien-hsiang himself speak to us." He made way for the carter.

As Tien-hsiang stepped on to the platform, dead silence fell on the meeting.

Awkwardly gripping the edge of the table, he stood there hanging his head and blinking. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. Many of those in the audience who knew how tongue-tied he was were worried. It was more difficult for him to speak at a public meeting than for a duck to climb a ladder!

Time went by, second by second. Tien-hsiang was going through agony. Thinking of how his team leader had encouraged him before the meeting and how the co-op chairman had just announced that he was a labour hero after all, he felt grateful to everybody — but words failed him. He raised his head a little and saw hundreds of eyes staring at him. His heart pounded violently and his temples throbbed. At this point his eyes met another pair which, burning with anxiety and love, were urging him to speak. They were the eyes of his father.

Then warmth enveloped Tien-hsiang's heart. Suddenly forgetting himself, he began to speak clearly and loudly, to the amazement of the audience. They could not believe it was Tien-hsiang who was speaking. He could hardly believe it himself.

"I'm not qualified to be a labour hero!" he cried. "When I drove the cart back the other day, I stole something from our co-op. It was half a sack of fodder. I cheated the co-op and I am ashamed to face all my fellow co-op members, young and old. I've done something mean and rotten. Please punish me! . . ."

He spoke louder and louder, his face reddening and his voice growing hoarse. Below the platform some people sighed; others hung their heads. One old woman was wiping away her tears with the hem of her jacket: it was Tien-hsiang's mother.

As soon as he finished, people started calling out:

"You've corrected your mistake, so we'll forget it!"

"I agree that he should be elected all the same!"

Tien-hsiang's mother spent a sleepless night tossing restlessly on her bed. What her son had said at the meeting kept ringing in her ears. The next morning when Kuang-tai came home from the co-op, she called him to her room. The old man was surprised to see her standing there with a sickle and a copper scoop in her hands, her eyes red with weeping.

"These belong to the co-op," she told him. "Take them back for me, please. And those peas . . . it was I who took them, not our Tien-hsiang!" Then she threw herself down on the broad top of the wheat bin, and started sobbing.

Meng Kuang-tai looked from his old wife to the sickle and the copper scoop, astonished and delighted. He helped her to her feet. "That's all right," he soothed her. "But stop crying now. This change in you is worth more than all the wheat we've got this year."

July 10, 1954

A Bunch of Keys

1

Having passed through the period of "cold dew" and two hard frosts, the Chilitsun People's Commune cotton fields were a mass of fluffy white bolls, for most of the dark red leaves had fallen.

The crop was exceptionally fine this year, with every stem thickly padded. So, when harvesting time came round in early winter, the men too tied aprons around their waists and went to the fields to pick the cotton alongside their womenfolk.

Lin Yen-li, vice-chairman of the commune, had heard that some of the women of the Ninth Team had made a record picking of two hundred and forty catties of cotton in a day and he had joined the team to learn their method in order to popularize it.

Nearing the field, he heard a ring of laughter from the dense white growth. "What do you suppose those women are talking about?" he wondered, and stopped to listen.

"The old man in our family is nothing like yours," said one woman. "He's on good terms with everybody at home and eats whatever is placed before him. Sometimes, when he sees my hands are full getting a meal, he'll lend a hand—poke up the fire or hold the baby. But that old man at your house blows out his beard and looks daggers in the manner of the most indulged father-in-law."

Lin Yen-li recognized the voice as that of Chao Jung-hsien, leader of the women's group of the Ninth Team. "Of course they're different," another woman took up the thread. "Your father-in-law knew the taste of suffering, but mine was nothing but a middle peasant. Besides, my husband's brothers have all grown up and are managing the affairs of the family. But you should see how our father-in-law plays up at mealtime! He has to have his food placed before him just so and if he doesn't happen to take a fancy to it, you'll like as not be sent back to the kitchen to cook something special for him. On lunar New Year's Day we daughters-in-law were entitled to two wheaten rolls each, while he ate fine food every day for half a month, right up to Lantern Festival Day! Even then he starts scolding at the drop of a hat." Then the woman mimicked the crotchety old man: "Fie upon you! Raised a whole brood of kids, I have, and this is what I get to eat! Where's your conscience! Rest assured your children'll treat you no better than you do me!"

There followed a burst of laughter.

"Ah, Second Sister-in-law," chimed in an older voice, "you're a newcomer to our home. You didn't see him dash his bowl to the floor."

The younger woman spoke up. "Day before yesterday I said to him: 'Dad, why don't you let us prepare some dishes for you?' Guess what he said to that. 'I don't like your cooking!' Why, he picks a quarrel with people at the drop of a hat!"

The women chuckled.

Lin Yen-li's interest was roused, for he recognized the voices as those of Pan Yu-chen and Fang Chiao-feng, daughters-in-law of Pai Chu-feng.

When Fang Chiao-feng came to Chilitsun as a young bride. she was not particularly active in village affairs, but during the last few years, when women began working in the fields, she was elected a small group leader on account of her straightforwardness and ready tongue. Pan Yu-chen, on the other hand, was a woman of few words. For eighteen years she had been married to Pai Kuei, Pai Chu-feng's eldest son, and for eighteen years she had been under the old man's thumb.

Lin Yen-li was still listening when Chiao-feng emerged from the field with a giant bag of cotton.

"What are you doing there, Chairman?" she asked in surprise.

"Why, I'm listening to an opera!"

"Aiya, so you've been eavesdropping on us all the time!" exclaimed Chiao-feng, and the women burst out laughing.

"You won't be afraid of that so long as you have nothing to hide from people," said the chairman. "But here you are, comparing your fathers-in-law behind their backs!"

"We aren't afraid," said Chiao-feng. "We just mentioned you and you turn up. We're considering lodging a complaint with you."

"Well, go ahead and lodge it. Against whom?"

"Against my father-in-law," said Chiao-feng with a smile. "He still hasn't given up his patriarchal rule over the family!"

"You cadres ought to come to our home and see for yourselves," took up Yu-chen.

Lin Yen-li had by now unobtrusively joined in the cotton picking.

"What's all this? What do you mean by saying that your father-in-law hasn't given up his patriarchal rule?"

"I'll tell you," said Chiao-feng, going on with her picking. "The commune paid the salaries yesterday, didn't it? Well, my father-in-law drew the money for all thirteen of us again. Why, when bonuses were paid in the co-op days, he'd take everything home too. We three daughters-in-law never had the slightest idea how much he took in in a year. Now the commune's been set up we're all working and earning according to our work; but still he keeps all the money in his hands. Now, with the wages fixed by the group according to our work, is it reasonable for him not to give us the money?"

"Ask him to let you see the accounts," said Lin Yen-li with a smile.

"Ah, it's no use," pouted Chiao-feng. "We're not going to beg to him for it!"

"Really you must think of a way, Chairman," said Yu-chen. "Since my work was rated first-class in the team I've asked him twice for my pay but he just hemmed and hawed and said the family needed the money!"

"Chairman," said Chao Jung-hsien, the women's group leader, "I think the method of paying the salaries is at fault. Why are the wages not paid direct to each member? If all the salaries are put together and given to the head of the family to take back, the family members have to ask him for their shares afterwards."

"What should be done then, in your opinion?" said Lin Yen-li.

"Indeed! What should be done!" exclaimed Chiao-feng. "It's an ideological problem with my father-in-

law. In my opinion, you cadres should come to our home and call a meeting to argue with him!"

"All right. Ask your team leader Wen Sheng to chair the meeting, will that do?" asked Lin.

"Not him. He's out of the question!" said Chiao-feng. "He's in awe of our old man. Addresses him as 'Uncle' every time he talks to him. One would think he owed him money."

"Yen-li," said Jung-hsien, "you must go and preside over this meeting personally!"

"As commune chairman you mustn't be bureaucratic," said Chiao-feng deliberately. "You mustn't attend only big meetings and care nothing for the small!"

"Don't be so quick with your accusations," said Lin. "I'll be at your meeting all right. But tell me, will you really speak up!"

"Of course we will!" said Chiao-feng as though such a meeting were a matter of course. "Provided you're there, what do we care for face? Sister-in-law, you must speak up too!" she added, turning to Yu-chen.

"Oh, I will," agreed Yu-chen blushing.

"All right, then. We'll make it for tonight. All right?" asked Lin Yen-li.

"The sooner the better," said Chiao-feng cheerfully. "I'll get Chu-ying in on it too."

Chu-ying was Pai Chu-feng's third daughter-in-law. She worked at the oil press.

"Suppose the old man pounds the table and threatens to wash his hand of the whole business of managing the family's affairs saying how he's been repaid for his pains — what will you do then?"

"So much the better," chorussed Chiao-feng and Yu-chen. "What we're afraid of is that he won't say as much. It'll be all to the good if he drops the reins. Things aren't the same as they used to be."

And again they burst out laughing.

2

Old man Pai Chu-feng had been given the unusual nickname of "brain work" by the young men of the sideline group of the Ninth Team. He had been allocated the job of tending the duckweed pond beside the village, which was light work, but he often used to stay at home instead of going to work.

"I've got a lot of things to attend to," he would invariably say whenever the group sent for him. "I've got a big family — almost a dozen all told — and they depend on me to look after things for them. If I do things wrong, the whole family will suffer for it. Nothing would suit me better than to go to the farm, but then who would look after things at home? Things that call for careful consideration."

It was the same every time the young folks called him to come out, till finally they asked him: "Are you busy doing your 'brain work' again?"

"That's just what I'm doing," said Pai Chu-feng stolidly, unaware of the gibe. "Brain work is more tiring than physical labour. I'm responsible for the whole family, see?"

"Brain work indeed!" the young men had pooh-poohed and walked away chuckling. But from that time on Pai Chu-feng bore this remarkable nickname.

Old man Pai indeed had a large family. Before liberation he had been hard put to feed so many mouths, particularly as he was inclined to be lackadaisical. But with

liberation the situation changed. His children grew up and married and, especially since joining the co-op, with more than half a dozen grown-up family members working, the Pais claimed a lion's share of the bonuses paid out by the Ninth Team. Prospering like this, he began putting on airs, wearing silk in summer and in winter a sheepskin coat belted with blue silk under which he tucked one front hem to display the snow-white curls of the sheep's wool while he worked.

A few years back, Pai Chu-feng had certainly done some brain work, as evidenced by the bunch of keys rattling at his belt as he moved about — the key to his cow yard and the sheds where he stored his hay fodder and grain, the key to his cupboard, to the box where he kept the land deed, and the key to the chest where he put the work-point books and money. "It's no joke running a household," he would say with an air of modesty to whomever he met. "Constant strain on the mind."

"That's right!" the other would sometimes return. "Anyone who's raised a family knows the cost of upkeep. You must have worried a lot over it lately. Look how grey you're going!" At this point Pai Chu-feng would give a little cough as indication of the mental strain to which he was subjected.

But since Pai Chu-feng's family joined the co-op the year before, the keys to the sheds and the pen were little used. The pooling of the livestock, land and farm tools in the co-op had relieved Pai Chu-feng of much of his "brain work", a situation to which the old man was not at first accustomed, but in time he found himself a new occupation. Since his family made up nearly a fifth of the Ninth Team's labour force, Wen Sheng, the team leader, always anxious to smooth things over, would arrange work for Pai Chu-feng's family through him. For instance, when the beans were ready to be picked, he would immediately look up Pai Chu-feng. "Uncle Pai," he'd say, "we're getting the beans in today. How about sending a couple of hands along?"

"All right," Pai Chu-feng would agree and, returning home, would take his place in the courtyard and announce the team leader's plan. "Chiao-feng, you go to the field with your elder sister-in-law. Chu-ying'll stay home to tend the mill."

At that time the daughters-in-law knew only to do the jobs assigned them, caring nothing about the work-points. When they felt the old man was being altogether too partial in arranging the work they might give him a little back talk or complain to their husbands. Thus Pai Chu-feng still went about vaunting his "brain work".

"No easy job looking after such a big family! Take for instance arranging the jobs. The team leader simply says, 'Send some people along', and it's up to me to decide who goes and who stays. Everything comes to me to arrange. Besides, I've got my hands full with the household chores and checking the work-points with the co-op tally-man. Hi! All these troublesome jobs come to tax my poor brain!"

But old man Pai was finding people less and less willing to listen to his tale of woe. "What does he do all day but talk?" they thought. "What family has no business of its own to attend to? Without his acting the 'middle-man' his daughters-in-law might have fewer occasions to kick up rows!"

Nevertheless, few were willing to express their views to Pai Chu-feng's face and he continued arranging his family's work. When Lin Yen-li heard about the situa-

tion he criticized Wen Sheng. "Why don't you arrange things with his family members direct instead of through the old man? Your way only holds up the work and dampens their enthusiasm. Why, can't you, as the production team leader, so much as set foot in their house?"

This criticism of the production team leader led to Pai Chu-feng's being relieved of the burden of his "brain work". After the wheat harvest the people's commune was set up in Chilitsun. Two of his sons went to work in the carpentry shop, while the third was studying in middle school. The first and second daughters-in-law, Yu-chen and Chiao-feng, were now technicians in the cotton-growing team. The third daughter-in-law, Chu-ying, who was a primary school graduate, was the accountant in the oil pressing shop. Since everybody had his job, Pai Chu-feng could no longer find a place for his "brain work" in the family.

Pai Chu-feng had just turned fifty. That he was taken as an old man was simply because his eldest son, Pai Kuei, was already in his thirties and had given him grandchildren. In the days of the advanced co-op, when the work-point system was in force, the team did not ask him to work in view of the fact that his sons and daughters-in-law contributed their labour power and also because he always brought up his "brain work". After the establishment of the people's commune, however, the need of a "manager" was not felt in the house and he was freed for the labour force. The team cadres put their heads together and found a light job for him. His work would be growing duckweed in the pond for the side-line group.

Returning from the cotton field in the afternoon, Lin Yen-li went to the side-line group to tell Pai Chu-feng to come to the family meeting that evening. But not finding him there, he asked the young people where he had gone.

"He's not here two days out of three," they said. "He's supposed to be tending the duckweed but you won't find a shadow of him even if the wind blows fit to blow his plants away."

"Why don't you look him up at home?" asked the commune chairman.

"It was our team leader who put Pai Chu-feng on this job. He said he had leave from him," said a young man.

"The team leader said we'd just have to put up with him somehow," put in one of the girls.

Yen-li was furious. "Wen Sheng must have fallen into his old weakness again," he thought. "No wonder people call him 'face' leader. Pai Chu-feng has indeed found an ideal 'leader' in him."

As a matter of fact, Wen Sheng had come from a poor peasant family and was a good team leader as far as production was concerned. His trouble was that he was not very advanced in outlook and rather touchy on the question of face. During the stage of co-operation, when some well-to-do middle peasants pooled their carts and farm tools in the co-op, he felt as if the poor peasants had gained at the expense of the middle peasants. After that he would soften his voice when speaking to the well-to-do middle peasants and sometimes not even dare assign jobs to them. During the campaign to rectify the shortcomings of the Party and the co-ops the year before, he

had received criticism in the mass debate meetings and big-character posters. As a result he had made some progress but, with the formation of the people's commune, had sunk back once more into his old attitudes. As he saw things, the masses were "benefiting" themselves at the expense of Pai Chu-feng as family head even if he did not work because his sons and daughters-in-law were working for the commune.

This view of Wen Sheng did not escape Pai Chu-feng's notice, and scarcely a day passed but he obtained leave of Wen Sheng on the pretext of having household affairs to attend to. Sometimes he would sound Wen out: "I'm sure you fellows wouldn't blame me if I didn't work. But I'm not like that. I can still move my arms about a little!"

Wen Sheng would nod as he listened and then say: "Ah so, that's true, Uncle Pai. It's really not work at all; just take your job as a bit of exercise!"

But others did not approve of Pai Chu-feng's attitude, particularly the old model workers, and such comforting words came from Wen Sheng alone.

Lin Yen-li found Pai Chu-feng and Wen Sheng in the Ninth Team's accounting office. The team was granting awards to its outstanding workers and Pai Chu-feng was sitting airily to one side waiting for his turn while Wen Sheng and the accountant were counting out and issuing the sums.

Yen-li entered and seated himself on the sidelines to watch in silence. "We'll just see how Wen Sheng handles this," he was thinking.

"Here!" cried Pai Chu-feng on hearing Chiao-feng's name called by the accountant. "It's my turn now!" he said as he stepped up.

"You've got a big family. You'll have a pile of money to take home, I reckon," someone remarked.

"That's why I'm in no hurry," said Pai Chu-feng with some pride. "Let the others take theirs first. I can wait. Wen Sheng, how many shares are there altogether for my family? Just give me a lump sum, will you?"

"All right," said Wen Sheng turning to the accountant: "Count out the awards for Uncle Pai. Give him Brother Kuei's, Yu-chen's and Chu-ying's!"

The accountant scanned the account book, clicked the abacus and paid the sums to Pai Chu-feng. Removing the name tags on the packets and putting them together, Pai Chu-feng thrust the money into his pocket, observing, "Well, that's more handy!"

Handing him a slip of paper the accountant explained: "Here's a list of the individual awards for each, including the first and second class, and also remuneration for the children who helped in the autumn harvest."

But Pai Chu-feng only crushed the paper and threw it on the ground.

"No need for that," he said, "it's all the same in our family!"

"I reckon Uncle Pai's good at figures. There'll be no mistake," said Wen Sheng.

Seeing what airs Pai Chu-feng was giving himself, Lin Yen-li picked up the slip of paper unnoticed, then went to face Pai as he turned to go out.

"Got the awards?" he asked. "How much do they come to?"

"Quite a tidy little sum!" said Pai Chu-feng equivocally. "Anyway I'm satisfied, Chairman!"

"And is it yours?" asked Yen-li pointedly.

Pai Chu-feng flushed. "Son," he said forcing a smile, "you love to joke with your old uncle, don't you? How can I receive awards if not for my sons and daughters-in-law?"

"In that case, how are you going to distribute them when you get home?" pursued the chairman.

"Don't worry about that. We're all one family," said Pai Chu-feng.

"Uncle Pai has a good memory," put in Wen Sheng.

Yen-li turned to a new tack. "Aren't you in charge of growing the duckweed? Do you know they've been blown away by the wind?"

At the mention of the duckweed Pai Chu-feng felt in a corner.

"Er-er-" he stuttered, eyeing Wen Sheng for help.

"It's true Uncle Pai's a bit slack on that score," Wen Sheng came to his aid with a smile. "In fact, everybody knows the situation and nobody takes him seriously."

"That's how it is," appended Pai Chu-feng hurriedly. "Wen Sheng and the others told me that since my sons and daughters-in-law are working they really don't expect me to work. But I insist on trying my hand at something."

"Such an attitude is wrong," said Yen-li to Wen Sheng in a low voice. "If Pai Chu-feng asked to do something, he must do it well. He shouldn't take his job lightly, 'Three days fishing and two days sunning the net,' so to say. The duckweed is the property of the commune. I brought the seed all the way from Hupeh. Who's responsible now that the plants have been swept off by the wind?"

Seeing that Yen-li was in dead earnest, Wen Sheng said to him: "You're right, Chairman. Uncle Pai, better bestir yourself somehow in future."

"And you're not right in talking about your sons and daughters-in-law all the time as you do," said Yen-li to Pai Chu-feng. "They've got their own jobs; you've got yours. You mustn't look upon them as your private property. You're scarcely over fifty. How can you fail in such an easy job as growing duckweed? Isn't that so? Well, let's heat what you've got to say."

"Quite right, quite right!" said Pai Chu-feng. Still he felt his head humming.

"Don't go out this evening," Yen-li told him. "There's a meeting."

"Meeting? Where?" asked Pai Chu-feng with a start.

"At your house. Your family meeting."

"Oh that's all right! We're always having meetings at our house," said Pai Chu-feng, greatly relieved.

4

After supper Pai Chu-feng lit the kerosene lamp and was counting the money before putting it away in the chest when Chiao-feng pushed aside the door curtain and entered, all smiles.

"Dad, did Yen-li tell you we're going to have a family meeting tonight?"

"What?" Pai Chu-feng was startled. He had not realized that Yen-li had been in earnest. Yet Chiao-feng knew.

"Oh, he did tell me something about holding a meeting with you," he parried. "But what need have we of a meeting? Oh, the commune's paid out some money. . . ."

"But," said Chiao-feng, "I heard that Yen-li and Kuei are coming too."

"So Yen-li's coming too! What for? Does he plan to have a show-down with me?" Pai Chu-feng thought and to Chiao-feng he said, "Yes, Yen-li told me he was coming for the meeting."

"In that case," said Chiao-feng, "I'll ask Yu-chen and Chu-ying to come too," and she went to call them. Yu-chen came in with her two daughters, and then Chu-ying came. Chiao-feng also went to fetch her son and all went to the main room. In a twinkling the room was alive with the noise of the children and the chatter and laughter of the women.

Pai Chu-feng felt out of his element and, like an ant on a hot stove, was bustling around outside in the courtyard one moment and sitting smoking inside the next. Chiao-feng and Chu-ying were talking between themselves.

"Chu-ying, you must speak up and say what's on your mind!" Pai Chu-feng heard Chiao-feng tell her.

"Surely I will. I'm not afraid of him," replied Chu-ying.

"But you must be careful not to overdo it. After all, he's our father-in-law!"

"I know. I'm only asking him to surrender his patriarchal authority!"

"Patriarchal authority!" Pai Chu-feng puzzled. "What on earth is this thing they want me to surrender?" he thought. But of one thing he was certain: Chiao-feng was the sharp-tongued sort. Who knew what tricks his daughters-in-law were up to? He had better watch out not to let them make a fool of him!

Just then the gate creaked and two men came into the courtyard. In the half-light of the moon he recognized Lin Yen-li and his eldest son Pai Kuei.

"Yen-li," he said with a smile, "I've been waiting for you for some time. Been holding off the meeting till you came. . . ."

"All right. Let's get started right now!" said Yen-li, going into the house with Pai Kuei.

"Uncle Pai," he said to Pai Chu-feng, "this meeting is called at the request of Kuei here and your daughters-in-law to discuss ways and means of getting along more harmoniously together, and so that you'll all enjoy greater freedom and unity. Now that the people's commune is set up, democratic management will be carried out there. Your family should also be run on democratic lines."

"Sure, sure," said Pai Chu-feng, nodding his head again and again.

"All right then," said Yen-li, "you speak first. Tell us how you think your family relationships can be improved."

"I speak first?" asked Pai Chu-feng rather diffidently.

Yen-li guessed at once what was in his mind and said with a smile: "An old man has his own views. Just tell us what you think."

Pai Chu-feng reflected for some time before he spoke. "Ah," he began, clearing his throat, "one must live with a view to thrift. As the saying goes, 'Nobody needs be afraid of a bad year if he has three piculs of vegetables in the larder!' I remember when your grandfather was still alive he used to rise at the fifth watch and go to the eastern hills to cart charcoal, not returning till late afternoon. And all that time he wouldn't spend a single penny for so much as a bowl of noodles. Only after getting home would he eat a couple of bowls of rice and some sweet potatoes. There's also the saying, 'Rice is no

sooner harvested than it's consumed; money is no sooner earned than it's spent' — easy come; easy go, that is."

"Dad, don't keep spinning those old yarns," objected Chiao-feng. "We've heard them a hundred times!"

"Dad, better tell us how you think the house can be run better in the future," put in Pai Kuei. "For instance, things like drawing the wages and arranging the work. Do you think these matters are better taken care of individually or all handled by you?"

Kuei's mention of the wages hit Pai Chu-feng's sore spot, but with the commune chairman there, he felt it better to listen to reason than make a fuss, as he might otherwise have done.

"You have your say then," he grunted. "How do I know? But in a family like ours, there's got to be a man to run things. If we men are going to listen to the women, the family'll go to the dogs!" The old man fixed his eyes at Pai Kuei, who turned and looked away.

But the women had other views on the question.

"That's all feudalistic twaddle about this being a men's world and all that!" retorted Chu-ying. "Isn't Chairman Chao Hsiu-ying a woman?"

"Men and women are equal now. How can you talk about men not listening to women?" put in Yu-chen.

"Dad," put in Chiao-feng, "you're still looking at things in the old way. Nowadays women don't depend on men for food or clothes. Everybody's got a job. The day's gone when the men could lord it over the women."

Now that the women had all spoken up, Yen-li said to Pai Chu-feng with a smile: "Listen, Uncle. They've spoken the truth. In managing household affairs, who would you listen to if not to the women? Of course women ought to listen to the men too. The question is

one of who's in the right. What do you say to that?"

"Then what I say is of no account!" sulked Pai Chu-feng.

"Don't get angry, Dad," said Chiao-feng, "but I think you're taking up more than you can manage. Take the matter of the wages for instance. We earned that money by our own labour, but you drew it without even letting us know how much you had brought home. The same's true with the arrangement of work. We've each of us got our own work, yet you still try to arrange jobs for us. You get our jobs mixed up and make no end of jokes at our expense."

"I can't take the money with me to the grave, can I?" said Pai Chu-feng.

"Of course you can't," said Chiao-feng with a laugh. "So why put yourself to so much trouble over it. We've got our own use for the money. Besides, you don't know what we need."

"One does have to buy a needle and some thread once in a while," murmured Pan Yu-chen.

Chiao-feng continued: "The other day I wanted to buy a corduroy coat for my little boy. You insisted on going yourself and you bought a green one, the wrong colour for a boy. . . ."

"I've asked him three times for the money to buy some dyestuffs but he gave me less than half a dollar for all . . ." added Pan Yu-chen in a low voice.

Hearing his daughters-in-law all attacking him, Pai Chu-feng said in a long-drawn-out voice: "A-i-ya! Just what I thought you were going to say about me! If all you want is to take the job of keeping the money out of my hands, why, I'll have more time on my hands than I'll know what to do with. If you take care of the money

yourselves, won't that relieve me of a lot of brain work though!"

"Dad, you're devoting your time to this voluntarily," said Chu-ying. "As a matter of fact, you can't do a good job of it. The accountant said that you are the most eager of all to go and check the work-points with him; but it turns out you always remembered them wrong."

"Who said so?" Pai Chu-feng scowled at Chu-ying. "Didn't they ask me to arrange your work every day and keep a record of your work-points?"

"Arrange our work indeed!" retorted Chiao-feng. "The team's got its own plan as to who's to pick cotton and who's to fight insects. Then you come along with: 'Yu-chen, you go today; Chiao-feng, you go tomorrow!' I'm a group leader. Do you think I don't know! The way you fixed things up never fitted in with the team's plan. Besides, we work all day but never know how much we've earned at the year's end. As a result, everybody was finding excuses for not going to the field, and production suffered."

"All right, I won't arrange any work for you from now on!" Pai Chu-feng vowed at last.

"Still you haven't given up your patriarchal authority completely!" Chiao-feng hastened to add.

The women giggled. Pai Kuei bit his lips to suppress a smile.

"How so? Tell me how you see the matter," said Pai Chu-feng.

Yen-li now spoke up with a smile: "Well, every member of the family should draw his or her own bonus. Now tell me, how many awards did you collect today? Who do they belong to? Whose is the first class, and whose the second?"

Now Pai Chu-feng hadn't bothered with the details. "I thought they were all awarded to our family," he stammered, very red in the face. "I don't exactly remember. Probably there's one for Yu-chen!"

"Look," said Yen-li, "you're quite wrong there! The awards were issued for outstanding work. They were a means of commendation, and now you've gone and made a muddle of them. How can they play their proper role? Now listen!" And with that the commune chairman took the tags from his pocket and read off the names and value of the awards one by one.

At that the women started afresh voicing their complaints, even the two little girls protesting. "We didn't know we'd been paid for the work we put in during the summer vacation! Granddad never told us. We must manage our own affairs!"

Now even Pai Kuei became emphatic. "You've got yourself into a scrape for no reason at all! How much better it would have been for you if you'd been contented with some light work instead of insisting on poking your nose into what was none of your business. People of the side-line group complained to me because you made a mess of the duckweed raising. For ever busy drawing wages and arranging work! What have you to fear now that you're earning your own wage? Do you think we won't give you money to spend if you really need it?"

"I'll make three suits of clothes for you, two unlined and one cotton-padded," said Chiao-feng.

"I'll buy you a fur-lined coat this year," offered Chu-ying.

"I'll supply you with shoes for both summer and winter, and socks too," said Yu-chen.

Pai Chu-feng was touched by these offers of his daughters-in-law to supply all his needs. He hadn't expected them to be so generous.

"Uncle, now do you see that your daughters-in-law are more advanced than you?" said Yen-li, patting the old man on the shoulder. "All they want to know is how much work they put in in a year. In spite of all your efforts to run things for them you've ended by making a muddle of things and undermining their enthusiasm."

Finding himself without a leg to stand on, Pai Chu-feng stood up and announced without reserve: "Since you're all so considerate of me, I won't make a nuisance of myself. I'll surrender my authority!" And so saying he untied the last key from his waist band and planked it down on the table.

From that meeting on, Pai Chu-feng was virtually released from his "brain work". Besides going out every day to cultivate the duckweed he volunteered to look after a flock of geese. He no longer arranged work schedules for his sons and daughters-in-law.

After the daughters-in-law took charge of their own wages their working enthusiasm knew no bounds. And when pay day came round the following month, each again got a bonus. On her day off, Pai Chu-feng's daughter Ling-chi came and, since his third son Jun-sheng had also returned from school, the daughters-in-law put their heads together to organize a celebration. Chiao-feng was charged with planning the details.

Now Chiao-feng was a thoughtful woman. She ordered some titbits from the shop and bought half pint of spirits,

so the old man could welcome his son and daughter with a drink. In the afternoon she took the whole family to the park for an outing.

Newly laid out by the commune, this park was not renowned for brightly painted pavilions, but it was a picturesque spot with many lovely ponds and rushes, graceful willows and groves of fruit trees in blossom. Other families were also spending the afternoon at the park, some enjoying the performance of a troupe of acrobats from town. Pai Chu-feng was pleased to see how warm and attentive Chiao-feng was to his daughter; and when he heard the holiday-makers lavishing praises on the ponds of lush green duckweed and the fine fat geese, he felt very much better indeed.

December 22, 1958

A Pair of Skinny Horses

1

After breakfast Han Mang-chung, head of the side-line team, started preparing for his journey to the market town to buy some young pigs. Thirteenth Uncle, a member of the team, was to go with him.

As Han Mang-chung got the poles and baskets ready, Thirteenth Uncle came up with a large white handkerchief in his hand.

"Mang-chung," he said, "let's go home to get a couple of pieces of steamed bread. We probably won't be back by noon."

"No, I'd thought of that, too."

The two men went back to Mang-chung's courtyard.

"Tsai Hsiu-chen! Tsai Hsiu-chen!" called Han Mang-chung.

A few women neighbours were inside the house helping Hsiu-chen to prepare fodder. Hearing Mang-chung's call, they smiled at one another. "Hey, Hsiu-chen, your man's calling you," shouted one.

"How sweetly he calls you! Tell'm Hsiu-chen's not here," said another.

"Probably he's coming to ask for fodder," put in a third.

A tall woman came out of the room. She had fine eyes and her round face was faintly flushed. "What are you shouting about?" she asked.

"Going to the market. Won't be back by noon. Want some steamed bread."

"Why didn't you just say that?" the woman said in a sober tone deliberately. "Why make such a noise?"

Han Mang-chung poked her in the ribs. "It's your name, isn't it? Why should you mind my calling you by it?"

The other women broke into laughter. Thirteenth Uncle, who had studied the Confucian classics for several months and considered himself an elder who shouldn't laugh aloud, turned his face to the wall and chuckled.

The tall woman was Han Mang-chung's wife, head of the side-line team. Usually — as was the traditional way between married couples — they never addressed each other by name, but Han Mang-chung was trying deliberately to break down the old custom. Hsiu-chen was still rather embarrassed by this, though it pleased her too.

"I'm not going to waste words on you." She gave him a quick look, then went to the kitchen and brought out four large pieces of bread.

"Ai! Our bread's very dark," she said as she wrapped it up in the handkerchief. "It's not fit to be seen."

"What does that matter?" said her husband casually. "Everybody knows that Haiyen Village Brigade is reckoned to be one of the poorer ones. We may have to eat dark bread, but our hearts aren't dark. Just wait a couple of years!"

He picked up the baskets and went out with Thirteenth Uncle.

2

It was market day in the town. Booths shaded with white canvas lined the main street, displaying cotton

prints, rubber-soled shoes, electric torches and all kinds of haberdashery. Han Mang-chung showed no interest in these things. He headed straight for the west end of the street, not even pausing before the luscious baskets of fresh cherries on the way. Thirteenth Uncle, however, stopped and bought ten cents' worth. By the time he had paid the money and was about to go, Mang-chung was out of sight. He found the young man at the livestock section where he had already bought a dozen young second-generation Yorkshire-cross pigs.

There were not many on sale. Since the brigades in the commune had started regular business accounting, none of them would sell their pigs without good reason. Mang-chung and Thirteenth Uncle waited till almost noon, but still couldn't find any more.

"I suppose there's no hope today," said Mang-chung ruefully. "These people here have all come to buy, not sell."

"I told you we didn't have much chance," replied Thirteenth Uncle. "All the brigades are expanding. It's like trying to borrow a long gown for New Year's Day — everybody's doing the same thing. We are lucky as it is."

"Let's wait just a bit longer!" Han Mang-chung looked around and suddenly noticed a crowd at the opposite corner. He dashed quickly over and pushed his way to the front. The people were looking at two very miserable horses. One was an old gelding, about 15 hands high, and so gaunt that its skin just hung on its bones. Its protruding teeth were yellow, and its lower jaw dangled loosely. The other was a reddish-brown pony with half-closed eyes and drooping ears. Its sagging spine stood out like the back of a kitchen cleaver.

The seller was a man of about thirty, wearing a peaked cap and a black cotton jacket with a blue sash. He seemed a bit embarrassed by the ribald comments of the watchers, but tried to look nonchalant as he said: "Sixty yuan for the two! Any brigade that wants them can take them away."

"Throw-outs! Look, they're nothing but skin and bone!"

"That one's so old it can't shut its mouth!"

"What could you do with them? You couldn't even get a square meal out of them."

The remarks got more scathing. But Han Mang-chung kept staring at the horses. He scrutinized them from head to tail, saying to himself, "I never imagined you could get a horse so cheap. The only draught animals in our brigade are oxen. If I were to buy these two and feed them well, they might be of some use." He stepped up to examine the beasts more closely. The gelding, he reckoned from its protruding yellow teeth, was at least twenty-five years old. He led it around once and decided there was still some strength in its legs. Then he looked at the pony. As he was about to prize open its mouth the animal neighed. Beaming with joy, Han Mang-chung thought to himself, "As long as you have a bit of spirit left, I can do something with you." Its teeth showed it to be about twelve years old. Apparently it was poor feeding and overwork that had sapped its strength.

The longer Mang-chung gazed at the horses the more he felt inclined to buy them, the more so when he heard the encouraging remarks of the crowd of onlookers: "Well, why don't you buy them? It's only the price of a couple of piglets!" But he was still not sure whether

they were worth buying, so he beckoned Thirteenth Uncle over to examine them. "They're thin as sticks," said the older man. "You probably couldn't do much with them. Why should anyone sell them if they're still useful?"

"The better-off brigades don't need to bother with skinny horses. But with us it's different. 'The rich man reckons the rich man's way and the poor man reckons the poor man's way,'" quoted Mang-chung sagely. "We're a poor brigade and we can't be too fussy about looks. I'm certain I could feed them up."

Mang-chung led the horses round once more for Thirteenth Uncle to look closely. The old man still hesitated. "Of course the price is reasonable," he said dubiously.

"See, their legs are all right!"

Thirteenth Uncle shook his head. "Mang-chung, give it up. There's no saying with such old rattle-ribs. What if they should drop dead when we get them back? Besides, the leadership has just been talking about misuse of public funds. We're here to buy pigs, not horses. Don't forget you're a Party member too!"

"Well, all right then," Mang-chung sighed. "We don't want to be accused of mishandling public funds."

Pushing their way out of the crowd, they got ready to go home. But Mang-chung still cogitated and said:

"Uncle, let's buy those horses."

"I doubt you've time to look after them," answered the old man. "Even if I have to wake at night I can feed them up, I'm sure."

"Any expenditure over five yuan has to be approved by the brigade leader."

"Hai, but we have to make our own decisions when we're out on a job like this."

"Well, you decide then! As the saying goes, 'When the general is out campaigning he can't wait for the emperor's orders'." Thirteenth Uncle fingered his beard. "After all you're doing it for the benefit of our brigade."

Mang-chung flung down his carrying-pole. "Right! I'm in for it. The worst I can get is criticism!" He turned and ran back for the horses.

3

The sun was setting as Han Mang-chung entered Haiyen Village leading the two tired beasts. People started to gather round.

"Where on earth did you get these ancestors of horses?" jeered some one.

"Anyone that tries to ride those skeletons will get sliced in two," said another.

Han Mang-chung sweated with embarrassment. He kept repeating to everybody, "Go on, talk! What do you expect for sixty yuan?"

When they heard how little he'd paid for them, the villagers stopped deriding him. Some even said he had got a bargain.

He led the horses to the barn, but Old Taotou, the stockman, said: "I've tried feeding old wrecks like that before. That one won't be able to get his nose in the manger with the younger animals. He chews too slowly. Besides, our commune leaders inspect and grade the livestock every month. Last month we didn't have a single 'third-grade' animal. Now you bring in these hacks. What grade do you expect they'll get?"

"What grade? Eighth!" snapped Mang-chung, starting to lead the horses away.

"Where are you taking them?" Old Taotou called after him.

"To the Home of Respect for the Aged!" was the reply.

In fact Han Mang-chung took the horses to the house of the side-line team. He knew that there was a small stone trough there and planned to feed them himself.

At dusk Sui-lin, the Communist Party secretary of the brigade, returned from the fields. Upon learning that Mang-chung had bought two horses he made straight for the yard of the side-line team. When he reached there he found Mang-chung and Thirteenth Uncle hard at work cleaning out a place for a pen. The two beasts were lying motionless in the yard, their eyes closed. Mang-chung told Sui-lin excitedly how he came to make the purchase.

"Since you've bought them, we'll keep them," said Sui-lin smiling. "Some can manage to buy strong horses, we take the old relics. Some day we'll be able to buy good livestock too."

These were just the words Mang-chung wanted to hear. He tried to make the horses get up to show them off. After a lot of shouts the pony struggled to its feet, but the old grey gelding wouldn't budge. Mang-chung kept on shouting and then gave it two kicks. The old beast moved its forelegs but still failed to stand up. Mang-chung felt so embarrassed that the sweat stood out on his brow.

"Get hold of his tail and lift," suggested Thirteenth Uncle. "The poor old creature has done plenty of walking and hasn't eaten all day. He's tired."

But Sui-lin stopped him. "Never mind. I've seen them. Just feed them well, mix some pea-pods with their fodder. They may turn out all right." He pointed to the pony and added, "That one looks as if he may have worms. Get the vet to look him over tomorrow." With this he left.

Tsai Hsiu-chen got back home after supper. "They told me you bought two treasures," she said to her husband. "Let's have a look at them."

"They're real jewels," Mang-chung smiled. "Look in the yard. Two big horses! When you first came here you used to say: 'Since I married into this hilly place, even the carts I ride in are ox-drawn. I never see a mule or a horse.' Now I've got you some horses."

"Aiya, you call those horses?" jeered Hsiu-chen, staring at them. "I'll never ride in a cart behind them!"

"You never can tell!" said Mang-chung seriously. "Hsiu-chen, don't say that. We're one of the poorer brigades, so we have to do things the hard way. I've made up my mind to turn these into good, useful animals. I hope you'll help me."

"How can I help?"

"Bring me some fodder every day when you come back," said Mang-chung eagerly.

"Oh, you!" laughed Hsiu-chen. "Always finding something for me to do. What a husband to have!"

At dusk the pen was in shape. Mang-chung led the horses to the trough, in which he put hay mixed with vegetable-water. He spread some bran over it. The old grey horse opened its big, loose mouth and began to eat in great gulps. The pony didn't tackle its food so heartily. It would only take a few bites where there was a layer of bran. Mang-chung pulled up a bench and sat down

by the trough. Bran-basket in hand, he looked at the pony. "I'll fill you up even if it takes me all night!" he said.

4

A month passed, and lush grass spread like a carpet over the southern slopes. Fed by Mang-chung day and night, the two animals began to fill out. The old grey horse could get to its feet without being lifted by the tail, and lost its shamble. The pony, after being treated for worms, developed a big appetite. Each of them drank a bucket of water daily and their coats began to look sleek.

Every day when Mang-chung drove the pigs up the hills, he would take the two horses along. He carried two baskets on his pole, one for collecting pig manure and one for fresh grass. Sometimes he would meet swineherds from other villages. They would comment with a smile: "You're doing four jobs at a time — herding pigs, collecting dung, cutting grass and grazing horses."

"Yes," Mang-chung smiled back, "a man has only two hands, but when you know how to use them they are as good as four."

"If everyone in your brigade works like you, you'll soon lose that 'poor-brigade' label."

"Can't say yet. Wait and see. Anyway, we have the will."

One day as Mang-chung was doing his fourfold job on the south hill, Party secretary Sui-lin came up to see him. When the horses saw him approaching, they lifted their heads and whinnied.

"Good work, Mang-chung!" called Sui-lin happily. "They can speak up now."

"Not good enough. They have to put on a bit of flesh yet." The praise warmed Mang-chung's heart.

"Look, they are pricking up their ears!"

"I thought I'd take them to Tsaishihpo tomorrow to carry a bit of coal. Just to try them out."

"Fine. But don't give them too big a load. Just let them get some exercise."

The next morning at cock-crow, Mang-chung saddled the horses, threw a basket over his shoulder, collected two pieces of steamed bread and drove the animals down the road.

Tsaishihpo was a small coal-depot supplying the whole neighbourhood. All along the road, a file of rubber-tyred carts, ox-drawn carts, horses and mules stretched in a long line.

Tsaishihpo was also Tsai Hsiu-chen's home village. Mang-chung had often gone there with her to visit his in-laws and knew many of the people. The minute he entered the coalyard with his skinny horses, someone called out jokingly:

"Hey, you from Haiyen Village, what strapping horses!"

"They may not be so grand, but the price was a good one. Sixty yuan for two! Take a few loads of coal along and we'll get our money back," replied Mang-chung.

He loaded only about a hundred catties in sacks on each horse. He was in dread lest they should collapse on the way home.

On the return journey he fell in behind a line of rubber-tyred carts from Huaitien Village, whose brigade was

one of the richer sort. The drivers were all young fellows in their twenties or early thirties, wearing coloured shirts and cropped hair. Their horses were brawny and their carts had style. As they drove up Pali Slope, the cracking of whips resounded in the valley. Passers-by stood still to watch them, and some clapped their hands in admiration.

Han Mang-chung followed these carts because he wanted to pick up some extra manure, but he was not aware of the contrast he made. Only two *li* up Pali Slope, the old gelding started to gasp for breath.

"You're a trier, at least," Mang-chung scolded, angry and laughing at the same time. But fearing that the load was too much for the horse, he took off one sack and shouldered it himself all the way back to the village.

He was still sweating profusely when Sui-lin came to see him.

"How did it go, Mang-chung? Got the coal back all right?"

"Yes," Mang-chung replied as he wiped his face. "But I'll have to work much harder feeding these two horses. I almost lost face at Tsaishihpo today."

"Pick it up again then," laughed Sui-lin. He pointed to the basketful of dung. "Did you collect all that too?"

"Yes. There was good manure all along the road today."

"That's the way. Others ride horses, we ride donkeys; others drive wagons, we pick up manure. All the members of our brigade carry dung-baskets whenever they go out."

When the wheat and new peas were harvested, the bran and pods made excellent fodder for the horses, and Mang-chung still cut two baskets of fresh grass for them every day. In less than a month, the horses were already in better condition.

The old grey gelding was filling out nicely. When it shed its winter coat, its whole body shone and its ribs could no longer be seen. It walked with a spring. The red pony changed even faster. It had grown sleek and muscular and trotted like a charger.

No one in the Haiyen Brigade had ever possessed such animals. They were as happy as if they had been awarded two red flags. The children were always running around keeping the flies off the horses, and the old folk would gather to stare at them. Even Old Taotou the stockman kept exclaiming, "I never dreamed those two would put so much flesh."

Just at this time, the Party committees of the county and the commune, seeking to help the poorer brigades, let Haiyen have two rubber-tyred carts on credit. Mang-chung was delighted. It was time to haul coal again and the brigade leader said he could take one of the carts. He led the horses out, putting the gelding between the shafts and the pony in the traces. He decorated their harness with red flowers and bells. As he was about to leave the village, his wife came running after him, carrying a cloth bundle.

"Wait, wait! Give me a lift!" she shouted.

To tease her, Mang-chung pretended not to hear. Hsiu-chen shouted again: "Mang-chung, Mang-chung! Wait for me, will you!"

Mang-chung brought the horses to a standstill. As his wife caught up with him he said, smiling, "If you hadn't called me by name, I would have thought you were yelling at some donkey-driver."

"I am not going to argue with you," said Hsiu-chen as she settled herself on the cart.

"Coming to show off in your home village? Didn't you say you'd never ride in a cart drawn by these horses?"

"You didn't do it all by yourself!"

"So you had a part in it too?"

"Of course!" She took the whip from his hand. "Here, let me drive."

"Wait! I've forgotten something! I must go back!"

"What?"

"The dung-basket."

"Oh, let it go today!"

"My dear comrade, that's something we can't let go if we want to get rid of our 'poor-brigade' label."

He jumped off the cart and ran back towards the village.

June 12, 1959.

At Chenchiao Ferry

As the sun sank behind the mountain the wind suddenly dropped and purplish clouds gradually massed on the horizon. The dry loess earth gave forth a withering heat so that the willow branches hung motionless and the wheat drooped in the field. The birds lapsed into silence. The road was deserted, and a hush fell over the landscape as dusk descended.

Suddenly, from the road along the southern bank of the Yellow River came the thud of hooves and two rubber-tyred carts drawn by spirited mules sped towards Chen-chiao Ferry, stirring up a trail of dust behind them.

"Chin-ling!" called old man Ken-li from the rear cart, shouting to make himself heard above the rumbling of the wheels. "You got to watch the southeast in the mornings and keep your eyes on the northwest in the evenings. I don't like the look of those clouds to the northwest right now. Looks like rain!"

Chin-ling was a strapping lad of some twenty years, tall and broad-shouldered. He answered from the first cart in a ringing voice,

"Never mind, we'll make it across the river all right!—if not sooner then later."

He nudged Liu Erh-hsi, vice-chairman of the co-op, rousing him from his nap. "Hey, we're crossing!"

"Not yet!" replied Liu pushing his straw hat back off his face to glance around. "I know better where we are asleep than you do awake. We haven't reached the dyke

yet and there are still five more *li* to go after that. You can't put anything over on me. Ho, I've eaten more salt than you have rice and travelled farther over bridges than you've covered over roads. Why, I even ran an eating-house in Nankuan once. . . ."

Warming up to his subject, Liu pushed his hat right off, sat up and started "reminiscing". From the setting up of his restaurant he turned to the dishes he prepared with the greatest skill, and from there to telling about his many colleagues and acquaintances. "But nothing doing now," he sighed and shook his head. "Gave up the business more than ten years ago. . . . Still I can manage to be put up for ten or twenty days most anywhere I go and borrow what money I need from friends if I choose."

In the past such talk had won for Liu no little admiration in the village. Though everyone knew that while he made himself out as "boss" of the eating-house he had actually been a cook there, they still regarded him with some deference. For one thing he could judge the worth of an animal as soon as it was walked before him, and directly upon being made a vice-chairman of the co-op when it was set up that spring. He had purchased a number of mules for the co-op at a bargain price. Later he had picked up a rubber-tyred cart for four million yuan[1] and as soon as he arrived back at the village was offered five and half million for it. Besides, being quick-witted and nimble-footed, he ran errands to everybody's satisfaction. He knew the price of salt and oil and of the vegetables in the market. "He's seen a lot of the world; no wonder he's stuffed with worldly wisdom," people said.

[1] See footnote on page 1.

But Liu's store of worldly wisdom by no means won for him the unqualified approval of the young people. They wondered what there was to boast about in being able to get free meals for days at a stretch! "Can't measure up to a tractor even!"

Aware that the young people were not interested in his "reminiscences", Liu would generally refrain from telling his past experiences in their presence. Chin-ling, however, was more lively and fond of a good joke now and then. Liu thought he might be different. Besides, on this trip hauling goods for the County Federation of Co-ops he would come across many a concrete example to back up his claims to past renown: The fellow who had put them up at Tsaokang Ferry and the old man who had treated him to a cigarette a few days before were both old cronies. But Liu's colourful tales were lost on this young man. He had heard them once too often.

The faint rumbling of thunder came from the distance. Was the rain coming so soon? Chin-ling was thinking of the wheat hanging ripe in the fields. If the rain held off overnight he could get home and get the wheat cut the next day. The thunder became louder and louder. A fresh, moist wind rippled the wheat field and spurred Chin-ling to new vigour. At the crack of his whip the mule jogging along between the shafts quickened its pace, jolting the cart violently. Liu Erh-hsi clutched the side of the cart, the sentence in his mouth shaken to syllables and scattered in the evening breeze.

By the time they reached the dyke it had begun to drizzle and the willow copses on both banks showed grey in the mist. A few white sails and diffused lights moved on the river, while the lapping of the waves on the bank mingled with the patter of the rain.

"Shall we call it a day or cross the river?" old man Ken-li shouted from the rear cart.

"Cross . . ." came Chin-ling's reply, but before he had finished, Liu Erh-hsi interrupted him. "Call it a day!" he said. Then, giving Chin-ling a confidential nudge, he added, "Don't worry about the expense of putting up. You wouldn't starve here at Chenchiao Ferry even if it rained for a month!"

"Maybe you can afford to hang around here, but I can't! I'm not here to sponge meals off people!" Chin-ling said coldly, urging the mules on with a shout.

Chenchiao Ferry had been an important means of transport before the railway was built. Now, though there was little traffic since the railroad was opened, a number of inns and shops still kept their doors open. Ordinarily, only an occasional livestock dealer or vendor of eggs or cigarettes stopped overnight. But the last few days the wheat was ripening and commodity-exchange markets had been set up on the northern river bank. Peddlers of brooms, pitchforks, ginger and garlic were now milling about the ferry.

As soon as they pulled up at the ferry innkeepers came rushing out to greet Liu Erh-hsi as an old friend, just as he had boasted they would.

"Step in, Brother Erh-hsi! Those your co-op carts?"

"Drive in, Brother Erh-hsi! Let the boy fetch hot water for you!"

Liu Erh-hsi glanced triumphantly at Chin-ling as he exchanged pleasantries with the innkeepers, but Chin-ling looked away.

"Come on in!" said Liu Erh-hsi, turning too to look Chin-ling in the face.

Chin-ling thought a little and said: "We'd better go on. After all it's only a drizzle. And we've got to get the wheat in — it'll keep us hopping. If we cross the river now we may still make it."

"It's all right with me whether we go or stay," said old man Ken-li, his whip in hand.

"There's no ferry across, young man," put in the innkeeper.

Chin-ling said nothing but took his whip and went down to the riverside to inquire. There was no ferry. He could do nothing but drive the carts into the courtyard of the inn and unharness the horses.

Liu Erh-hsi settled right down into his element, like a fish put back into water. He was hail-fellow-well-met with everybody, and by the time supper was over was on excellent terms with the livestock dealers. He also helped the broom peddlers get their brooms into the house out of the rain.

Knowing the old man's temperament, Chin-ling dismissed all the goings-on with a little laugh and, after watering and feeding the mules, settled down in the hayloft to rest. As the rain beat down harder and harder he tossed about unable to sleep. The co-op's wheat, ripe for the sickle, would be drenched. If only it could be himself instead!

At that instant a path of light shot forth from the house and two men went out into the yard. One was Liu Erh-hsi; the other was a middle-aged man in a grey cotton suit. They walked up to the trough, looked into the small red mule's mouth, sized up its proportions, and went back talking in low voices.

Suspecting that something was up, Chin-ling threw on his clothes and tiptoed after them up to the house, where

he peeped in through the window. The lamp, borne back into the room, shone on a crowd of people gathered there.

"So be it!" the innkeeper was saying with a broad grin. "Four million and a half for the mule, O.K.? What a deal! You've a mule to the good, he gets rid of his brooms, and Brother Erh-hsi cleans up a tidy little fortune!"

"Oh, no, it's strictly co-op business," Liu Erh-hsi hastened to explain.

Chin-ling was amazed. He listened more carefully and learned that their vice-chairman was selling the red mule and with the proceeds buying up 500 brooms for re-sale. So! Chin-ling tiptoed back to the yard and related to old Ken-li what he had heard.

"He's our vice-chairman," replied the old man, "what can we . . . well anyway, it makes no difference to me what he sees fit to do."

Ken-li was weak-willed, Chin-ling knew. He himself could find no justification for the transaction no matter how hard he thought. Trading had been forbidden from the very first day the co-op was set up and the matter had been discussed at Party meetings too. On his way to look up the vice-chairman he ran into him in the courtyard. He was in high spirits. Seizing Chin-ling by the arm he said to him: "Come along, we've bumped into luck again!"

"You're buying brooms?"

"How do you know?" demanded Liu Erh-hsi with a start.

"Never mind how I know! In my opinion we're in no position to buy the brooms!" said Chin-ling, coming straight to the point.

Liu Erh-hsi detected the disapproval in Chin-ling's voice and, after thinking a little, grinned and said: "They've brought several cartloads of brooms up here, intending to sell at the market across the river. But with the rain coming on they've changed their minds and want to sell them now for 7,500 each! Now," and he lowered his voice so that it was barely audible, "in our Hsiaochuang market they'll go like hotcakes for 10,000. Now we buy up this lot and make 2,500 on each broom. Five hundred brooms will net us a profit of over a million! Why, we can buy a cart for the co-op . . ." Liu was going on at great length when Chin-ling cut him short.

"Didn't the supply and marketing co-op pull back scores of cartloads of brooms only the day before yesterday?" he asked.

Liu slapped his thigh as he retorted: "Never mind the supply and marketing co-op. They haven't got all the connections I've got. I'll bet my bottom dollar these two cartloads of brooms will sell out the very day we get back to Hsiaochuang!"

"You're thinking of selling the red mule too, but we still haven't enough draught animals in our co-op. What are you planning to do about that?"

"Hai, Chin-ling, I warrant we'll make enough off the brooms to buy two mules like that one!"

"Wasn't it made clear at the time the co-op was enlarged that nobody should engage in trading?"

"But this is a side transaction! You don't understand!"

"Did you make the brooms?" Chin-ling asked pointedly. Then he laughed. "Uncle Erh-hsi," he said, "I may understand very little, but I do know that we earn our living by honest labour. Besides, it's time to harvest the wheat. If you sell the mule, what'll. . . ."

But before he could finish, Liu Erh-hsi waved him aside. "If I say I can buy two mules that means I can. You've got to show your guts in these things; the chicken-hearted get nowhere!"

Chin-ling was now angry, but after thinking it over a little, he managed to say in a fairly mild tone: "Uncle Erh-hsi, it's not a question of showing guts or not. The co-op's never asked you to go in for trading. What shall we say for ourselves if people blame us when we get back?"

"In that case they can put the blame on me."

"And what good will that do! It'll be too late then. Furthermore, this is a co-op affair. You can't just go about doing as you please!" With that Chin-ling rose and went to see about the animals' fodder.

Shaken by Chin-ling's uncompromising stand, Liu Erh-hsi turned to old Ken-li: "What d'you think? Should we make that purchase for our co-op or not?"

The old man looked at him and thought for some time before he replied. "Do as you like," he said. "I've got no objections either way. But if you sell the mule. . . ."

At this point Liu Erh-hsi made a grab for the mule and Chin-ling came up and seized the reins. "What are you doing?"

"Who's running things here, you or me?" demanded Liu heatedly.

"You're in command, and so am I. Everybody is."

"But I'm the vice-chairman, aren't I?"

"So you are, and we'll listen to you when you're right; but we won't when you're wrong!"

"Going to be tough about it, eh!" Liu Erh-hsi flared up and went on grumbling in a loud voice.

Chin-ling kept silent. Liu finally came to an end of his tirade by saying: "It's a loss to the co-op to have sent

an unreasonable fellow like you along with me!" He then strode off in high dudgeon. Sensing that Liu hadn't given up his idea of going through with the transactions, Chin-ling followed him. Liu retraced his steps to the door of the innkeeper's room where he hesitated awhile before entering.

The people waiting there raised their heads at his approach. "Chairman Liu," one asked, "what do they say?"

"They don't agree, do they?" probed the innkeeper provocatively.

"They raised no objection," said Liu as casually as he could. "They told me to use my own judgement. But I've decided not to sell the mule now—I may need it for trips later."

How ridiculous Liu Erh-hsi was making himself! He was certainly a most conceited fellow, Chin-ling was thinking.

"Well, if you're not ready to sell the mule, how about buying our brooms?" asked one of the peddlers gazing hard at Liu Erh-hsi.

"Why, of course!" Liu nodded. "We'll take the brooms first and pay you in cash after three days. You can come and collect your money, or we'll send it to you as you like." Then with a smirk he added, "It's nothing really! We're used to handling three or four million yuan a day. I like doing things in a business-like way."

Seeing the hesitant expression on the broom dealer's face, the innkeeper prompted him: "It's the co-op you're making a deal with, no one else; what are you afraid of? You'll get your money in a few days."

"I just want to get everything straight first, that's all . . ." said the dealer, frowning. "Suppose I go for the money the day after tomorrow, will you have it ready?"

Hearing the bargaining going on again, Chin-ling burst into the room.

"Are you the broom dealer?" he addressed the man, coming straight to the point. "We're not in the market for your brooms. Let's get that clear. If you leave your brooms and get no money, don't blame our co-op!"

"You! Chin-ling!" cried Liu Erh-hsi gesticulating in his rage. "You'll be responsible if the deal falls through! . . ."

"I'll take the responsibility!" said Chin-ling decidedly after thinking the matter over a moment.

Liu Erh-hsi was taken aback. "You needn't be afraid I'll pocket the money, Chin-ling," he said crestfallen.

"It isn't right even if you didn't pocket the money!" replied Chin-ling. "It's a producers' co-op we're running, not a speculation agency. . . ."

The innkeeper knew Chin-ling meant what he said. "All right, all right!" he quickly interceded. "Don't get angry."

"So that's it! You've got no money and we've been wasting our breath!" sneered the dealer.

By that time the others in the room were snickering and taunting Liu Erh-hsi till he got red in the face. "Give me five brooms!" he raged. "I'll pay cash for them!" And he flung a wad of notes on the table as he scowled at Chin-ling. "I'll take a few along for Liu Chin-tsai too and save him a few thousand!"

"Go ahead! Help yourself!" said Chin-ling with a laugh and left the room.

It stopped raining about midnight and Chin-ling lay under the shed thinking as he listened to the mules munching hay. Then, planning to have another talk with the vice-chairman, he slipped on his clothes and went in to where Liu Erh-hsi was sleeping.

"Liu Erh-hsi," he called, but there was no response. He called again, but Liu's snoring became even louder. He struck a match. Ha! What were those two bunches of garlic doing there on the ground! "What did you pay for the garlic?" Liu was awakened now, and he sat up.

"Two thousand, four hundred!" he blurted out. "I bought them for Old Chi back at the restaurant. Six hundred a bunch cheaper than at the market at Hsiao-chuang. Better go home with anything rather than empty-handed!"

"Uncle Erh-hsi, can't you think of anything but buying and selling?. . ." Chin-ling tried to talk to him, but Liu waved him aside.

"Enough of this! I'll report you to our co-op's management committee when we get back!" he stormed, flopping back on the bed and pulling the quilt over his head.

Chin-ling could only laugh at such stubbornness. "I'll report this even if you don't. In any case you can't buy now!"

"I'm not listening! I'm not listening!" Liu Erh-hsi shook a fist from out of his quilt.

Chin-ling paid no attention but returned to his place in the yard.

Before daylight Chin-ling was up and put the harness in order. He then awakened old Ken-li and yoked the mules to the carts.

"Shall we call the vice-chairman?" asked old man Ken-li.

"Don't bother! Let's get going!" said Chin-ling looking grim.

With a crack of the whip the carts moved off with a rumble towards the river bank, cutting through the fog and splashing through the puddles.

At daybreak a bluish grey mist hung over the fields while rose-streaked clouds floated across the sky. Across the river the forest was shrouded in drifts of fog and looked like a town bristling with smokestacks.

The Yellow River raced east. A wind blew gently from the south and boats near the bank raised their sails to catch it. Chin-ling drove the cart down on to the large ferry-boat moored at the bank. Running his eyes over the golden fields on the other side and visualizing the harvest scenes, Chin-ling felt a surge of delight at the thought of the work ahead of them.

When Liu Erh-hsi awoke, thinking still to buy the brooms, he went out but finding neither the carts nor his travelling companions in the yard, he made inquiry at the inn and was told that they had gone. He had the wit to examine the fresh mule dung on the ground, so he knew that the carts could not have gone far. He scurried back to his room, grabbed his garlic and brooms and made a dash for the ferry shouting as he ran. But he couldn't run very fast, for the brooms and garlic hung from him like a heavy tail.

September 1954

Men Are Taller Than Mountains

I was once in the Tsoya Mountains, and it was a wonderful experience. The Pingkuto Peak soars high into the clouds. I spent a night up there on the very top of that peak. Ai! It was an unforgettable night!

It happened during the days when the people's communes were being set up. There had been much talk about merging the twenty-three advanced co-operatives of our seven small townships to form one big commune. The daily scene outside the office of the Yangchaichieh district committee of the Communist Party was like a big festival. From dawn to dusk the sound of drums and gongs reverberated as people came appealing for the merger. The three streets of Yangchaichieh were practically jammed with carts carrying posters and resolutions in support of the amalgamation. I was then chairman of the Forward No. 1 Co-operative, an undertaking which was considered to be fairly well managed. Our co-operative was better off than most of the others. Secretary Lin of the district Party committee happened to meet me and said, "Old Feng, why don't you go to the co-operative in the Tsoya Mountains and have a look around? See if there are any possibilities for development up there. As we're all going to be in the same people's commune, it will be useful to know more about the mountain co-operative."

I understood his point, and thought this was something that should be considered. The co-operative from the Tsoya Mountains was among those which the day before

had sent posters and resolutions to the district committee appealing for the merger. The district was about thirty *li* from the Tsoya range, and we never went up to the mountains. All we knew about conditions up there was that good land was scarce, the plots small, the topsoil thin, rocks numerous, and that draught animals and tools were sorely needed. As for the people up there, who wore those double-soled, durable shoes, we thought that they knew nothing better than to spend all their days climbing around the mountains. I had somewhat selfish thoughts about their joining our big commune and said, "They're so far from Yangchaichieh, it would be much better if they were to join the commune in the fourth district!" Just as I said this, Secretary Lin happened to be standing right beside me and overheard me. He glanced at me but said nothing. I never thought that later on he'd ask me to go and take a look at the mountains!

After making his suggestion, Secretary Lin looked at me and it was clear that we understood each other. I thought to myself that he was pretty sharp, able to see right through a person. He was not asking me to take a look at the mountains, he really wanted me to overcome that old fault of mine of jumping to hasty conclusions. Well, if it had to be done it had to! Actually I was wanting to take a look at those mountains. . . .

After lunch, I donned a straw hat, slung a tobacco pouch over my shoulder, and set out along a small mountain path. A person walking alone travels fast. The sun had barely tipped to the west when I crossed the Phoenix Wing Ridge and arrived at the foot of the mountains.

As I was walking along, from a mountain gully behind me, I suddenly heard the sound of someone singing:

A virgin mountain rises high before our door,
Its barren ridges scrape on heaven's very floor,
We always used to call her the monk's bald head,
But now we'll be calling her paradise instead.

What difficulties ever scared heroes away,
We'll move the very heavens right down to earth
to stay.
And if the stubborn mountains should hold their
treasures tight,
We'll keep on working till our beards grow white.

The verse was sung to a local opera tune. The voice was crisp and clear. I thought to myself: Don't underrate these mountain people! How fresh those words are, and with what vigour they are sung! As I was thinking this the singer came towards me. His clothes were made of home-spun cotton cloth, and on his feet were a pair of double-soled shoes. In his hand he carried a small manure fork. He scraped a mass of cow droppings onto the fork with his foot, then with a deft swing of his arm, landed it on the wheat field beside the road.

When I saw that he only carried a small manure fork, and had no manure basket on his back, I knew he must be a cadre. The co-operative members recorded work-points and always carried baskets for collecting manure, but when the cadres collected manure, they threw it on the nearest piece of land, thus contributing to the success of the co-operative.

Then I recognized the man as Chang Pan-shan, secretary of the Party branch of the mountain co-operative. He was about my age. We had met before at the district meetings. When he saw me, he leaped to my side and taking hold of my elbow said, "Hai! Aiyo! What kind of wind blew you here?"

"What kind of wind? the big leap wind!" I chuckled and then added, "Pan-shan! I heard you sing a bit of opera. A line of opera sung here in the mountains really does sound beautiful!"

He laughed and patted me on the shoulder. "That was composed for our youth brigade," he said. "I was singing whatever came into my head."

We went towards the village, talking as we walked. In the village ox carts, handcarts, ploughs and harrows of every description were spread all over the place. Many people were busily cleaning, oiling, and repairing them.

"What's all this about?" I asked.

"When the co-operative members heard that we were going to join the commune," he smiled, "they suggested that all the farm tools be cleaned and repaired. They also proposed to weed and top-dress all the fields within the next three days. We shall not take a single piece of uncultivated or unmanured land into the commune with us."

Hearing this, I began to appreciate the worth of these people. Glancing around, I noticed that the village itself was neat and clean. There were large piles of compost stacked neatly alongside the streets and the oxen in the pens all looked well fed. Better not underestimate things up here, I thought, the spirit of the great leap has come to the mountain all right!

As we were talking, an old man brought over a big plate of pears, and a large bowl of ripe persimmons. "I'm not a guest," I told him, "we'll soon all be in the same commune — just one big family — there's no need to treat me this way."

When I said, "We'll soon be one big family," I could see that Pan-shan was very pleased.

"Eat!" he said. "We treat everybody this way. There's plenty of fruit in our mountains."

He pressed a persimmon into my hand. "Try this one!" he said. "It's not so easy to get to our mountains, you can do with some refreshment. We're accustomed to seeing more of rocks than people, you don't know how glad we are to welcome a guest."

"Now there you go again, still treating me as a guest." I protested.

"Guest or no guest," he replied, "the very fact that you've come here is a sign that this mountain of ours is in for a change." Then lowering his voice he continued, "When we heard we were going to join together we were very pleased. By the way aren't you the chairman of that Fengchiawan Co-operative? It seems I've seen you before. Oh, yes, I remember, I visited your co-op some time ago. You people are already farming with machinery."

I must admit that I have a bit of a fault — I easily get swelled-headed. When the old man said he recognized me, and knew something about our co-operative, I began to feel a bit cocky. As I was eating the persimmon the villagers crowded around and I asked, "Do you want to join up with us in a commune?"

"We certainly do," they laughed. "We've thought about it for a long time!"

One of them, an old fellow, said, "Your joining with us will be like a plump old woman riding a skinny little donkey — the fat makes up for what the thin one lacks."

"When we heard that we were going to join up in the big commune," Pan-shan quickly added, "our co-operative members were so happy that they could hardly sleep for excitement. Another thing, our young fellows have been unable to find wives. The girls down below thought that

these mountains were too remote to live in and that we mountain folk were poor and backward. The day before yesterday when we sent our resolutions to the district, the folk down below saw differently and realized that there was something in us after all. Two couples got fixed up the very same day."

As they joked and laughed I was even more pleased, and began to get even more above myself. I rolled up my sleeves and promised them, "Never mind! We'll build a highway right up to your village, and bring our tractors up for you to use. Besides, with all the good green grass you've got up here, we'll bring our big dairy cows up to pasture, we'll start a dairy farm right here. By the time we've done that the girls from down below will be carrying their baggage up here, looking for a husband."

They all laughed heartily. Someone asked, "We hear that your dairy cows give a can of milk a day. How much did you pay for them?"

I stuck out my forefinger and thumb, then said, "Eight hundred dollars each!" Before I could finish speaking everyone around was praising our dairy cows.

It was now mid-afternoon and Pan-shan urged me, "Old Feng, let's go and have a look at the mountains!"

"Aren't we already in the mountains?" I asked.

"Well," he laughed, "we are only at the edge of them. All that's really worth seeing is up inside. If this bit of hilly land was all we had, we should be a pretty poor kind of mountain co-op!"

He raised his voice as he finished speaking. Then I realized that I'd been boasting half the day after only seeing the beginnings of what these people had to offer. "Let's go," I said, "let's have a look at your big mountain forests."

Pan-shan tied a hemp rope round his waist, slung the manure fork over his shoulder, handed me a carrying-pole and we set out together.

We passed a few scattered houses at the edge of the village and then trudged up into the mountains where there was not a trace of human habitation. We followed a path which twisted along a little bubbling stream. Pan-shan explained to me, "Most mountain paths follow the water. The people and the water follow the same path." Then picking a blade of grass he said, "Look at this. What kind of grass is it?"

I looked it over but couldn't recognize it. He smiled and said, "That's *tsai-hu*; a kind of medicinal herb; there's plenty of it here. One person can gather ten catties a day. After drying it a bit at home, he can take it to the collecting station and sell it for over forty cents a catty."

"If that's the case," I asked, "why don't you organize some people to gather it?"

"Where are the people? We've only got seventy families in our co-op. It takes us all our time to handle the crops. There are plenty of herbs in these mountains." Then pointing to the grass on the mountain slope, he added, "Look over there, that's *fang feng*. Just over there on that ridge is another kind of herb, and a very valuable one too. It's an excellent tonic herb, and is nearly worth its weight in gold."

My eyes opened wide as Pan-shan pointed all this out to me. "Ai!" I exclaimed, "I never dreamed you people up here had so many treasures. We've got plenty of labour power down below. The organization of a herb gathering brigade would be easy."

"That would be splendid," he said, "it would certainly increase the members' income."

We skirted one mountain, rounded its shoulder and were suddenly confronted by the two broad slopes of a huge mountain basin some ten *li* long. The upper slopes of the basin were covered with apricot, plum and crab apple trees, scattered among which were a few huge walnut trees. Their trunks were so thick that you couldn't get your arms around them. The floor of the basin was completely covered with different varieties of tall, luxuriant fodder grass. At our place on the plain, coarse thatching grass cost ten cents a catty. As for green fodder grasses, only small patches could be found along the ridges. It was expensive and only a small quantity was available. The sight of so much fodder made me exclaim in excitement, "Pan-shan! You people go begging with a golden bowl! Scores of head of cattle and sheep could graze in these pastures!"

"We had a bit of a plan," he said, "and hoped to start a small livestock farm up here in three years. But now we're going to form a commune you can herd all your cattle up here. There's enough grass here to feed two to three thousand head of cattle. It's also cheap to build cow sheds up here as we have both timber and thatching straw on hand. The building of cow sheds is only a small proposition. There's plenty of floor-space for the asking."

"Pan-shan," I asked, "why didn't you start your project earlier?"

"Well, in the past we hardly dared even think of such things!"

"Why?"

"It's only now, when we're going to join the people's commune that we can think of such things seriously. New roads seem to be opening up for us in all directions." Then pointing to the fruit trees, he said, "Take those

apricot trees for example, every year they bear fruit as thick as braided garlic. It weighs the branches down. Yet when it ripens it falls off to rot in the gullies down below, hundreds of thousands of catties per year! The best we can do is to gather up the stones in the winter and sell them to the drug store!"

"Hai!" I said. "Why don't we build a fruit processing plant there?"

"Just a processing plant?" he exclaimed. "Why, we can build a distillery too! We'll bottle the most delicious red and green wines. Just wait till our big brothers, the city industrial workers, have a taste of our mountain fruit wines!"

After seeing the fruit trees, I said to Pan-shan, "It looks to me that it's not a case of a plump old woman riding a skinny little donkey but rather a plump old woman riding a big fat mule!"

He chuckled. Then his eyes suddenly sparkled as he said, "Old Feng, there are lots more treasures of every kind up inside!" Pointing westward to some deep, dark green mountain gorges, he added, "Look over there, that's all thick mountain forests, stretching for tens of *li*. There are red pine trees, firs, chestnuts and many other useful varieties. They are so tall they seem to pierce the very heavens, their trunks are so thick a man can't possibly reach around them. In future when our commune needs lumber, there will be more than sufficient for its needs. Look at that mountain to the east, it was ruined, burnt out by the Kuomintang. We've already planted saplings there. The trunks of some of them have already grown as big round as a bowl. Shortage of manpower has prevented us from re-planting trees more quickly. The possibilities for development in the future are boundless!"

"Never mind," I said, "when I go back I'll talk it over with Secretary Lin, and when the co-op brigade members have a bit of spare time, we'll get a good sized crowd to come up and plant trees."

"That'd be wonderful. If a few hundred people were to come up it wouldn't take many days to clothe these bald mountains with greenery."

The more we talked the more excited we became. I told him that I wanted to go and have a look in the forest, but he explained that the forest was cut off by a deep gorge. The roads in the mountains were deceptive. They looked quite a short distance, but when you walked up and down it meant a stiff climb and descent of about eighteen *li*. He led me to the north, saying there were more treasures over there. I meekly followed along behind him, thrusting deeper and deeper into the mountains. After skirting the heads of several gorges, the path slowly dwindled until it completely faded out. By this time we were using our hands, grasping the rocks as we climbed the steep mountain slopes. On the slopes the grass was waist deep, some being last winter's dry stalks, the rest new growth. The hillsides were a mass of green and yellow.

After scrambling over two high ridges, we were suddenly confronted with a huge rock cliff bulging out from the side of the mountain. I lifted my head to have a good look. Wow! We were surrounded by a great red mass of tremendous pinnacle rocks. Whichever way you looked there was a forest of peaks with glimpses of blue sky between.

"Pan-shan," I cried, "why in the world did you bring me here? What's the name of this place anyway?"

Putting his hands on his hips, Pan-shan chuckled, "I think you've never heard of it before. It's called 'Lift Your Head and Your Hat Will Fall'—a name given it by the old folk. If you lift your head to look up to the top of the peaks, your hat is certain to drop off. Rich treasures are buried in this mountain."

Then he led me to the base of the cliff where a large piece of red sandstone had been placed. On the sandstone was a pile of ashes, evidently placed there some days previously as a land-mark. He pushed the stone and uncovered a small opening. Reaching inside, he pulled out a small piece of dark soft red stone. Handing it to me, he asked, "What do you think that is?"

"Iron ore!" I cried happily.

"Yes! These slopes are full of it. According to our old people, this ore can be smelted to make plough blades of a very high grade. It is eighty to ninety per cent pure iron! Well, we can smelt it to make tractors some day!"

As I looked over the colourfully streaked cliffs, I noticed veins of iron ore cropping out all over the place. Who'd have thought that this barren gully could conceal such riches! Shaking Pan-shan's shoulder I exclaimed, "This mountain is truly a treasure!"

At this Pan-shan became even more enthusiastic. Pointing up to the cloud-covered Pingkuto Peak, he said, "Old Feng, let's go up! Let's climb to the top. There are even more precious things up there."

"What things?" I asked.

"Rock crystals."

"How do you know?"

"I've been up there, the whole cliff is covered with transparent crystals as white as snow."

He said this with such enthusiasm that, anxious to see them, I started climbing up behind him. The peak is several hundred feet high. I looked at the sky. The sun was pressing close on the western peaks. I must admit I was fagged out after following him over dozens of *li* of mountain paths. But because he was so enthusiastic and there was so much more to see I was reluctant to give up half way. So forcing myself forward I followed him up the mountain.

Pan-shan is used to climbing. Even when he walks on level ground he lifts his feet as though he were climbing a mountain slope, but when he really climbs he's simply terrific! We passed through some queer places where strange pinnacle rocks were as thick as a forest. Crossing over a knife-edge ridge, the path ended, and before us lay huge rocks and boulders. Down below gaped the misty ravine. To go forward we must leap from rock to rock.

Just as I was alternately scrambling along like a monkey and jumping like a goat, he started to tell me an old story about the Pingkuto Peak. "Long long ago the peak had the power to grow," he said. "It would grow seventy to eighty feet in one night. Finally, it grew right up into heaven. The gods of the sky got angry and slapped it down, changing its sharp arrogant peak into the flat hillock you now see."

Then he told stories of the eighteen caves of the mountain, a separate story for each one of them. He knew a tremendous number of old folk legends. On and on we climbed and it wasn't until the sun had kissed the western peaks that we finally reached the top of the mountain.

When I got up there with Pan-shan I realized the real potentialities of this mountain. The Pingkuto Peak is all flat land. It looks small from below, but actually it covered

an area of a hundred *mou*. Standing on the top you can see a very long way, the whole world lies spread out before you. The river looks like a narrow ribbon winding back and forth and shines like silver. The small reservoirs built by the commune look like a string of green grapes. Walking to the edge of the peak and looking straight down you can see nothing but a vast expanse of deep green, an endless ocean of forests. The trees are so thick, you feel as if you could just jump down and walk on that velvet carpet of leaves.

Then we went hunting for rock crystals and came to a pit full of sandstone. He dug about and pulled out a few clear crystals as thick as a finger. They were quite transparent, like icicles formed on the eaves in winter. Not knowing anything about rocks, I asked, "Pan-shan, how do you know these are rock crystals?"

"Look," he answered, "these crystals are all six-sided. I've asked a specialist, and he told me that these crystals are quartz. Optical glass is made from this kind of stone. These pieces are too small but there are bigger ones down below."

He began digging deeper. After a while, he dug up a crystal as big as a carrot, but alas we could not see it clearly and suddenly realized it was already dusk.

He became anxious. Everything below was indistinguishable in the twilight. He slowly shook his head and said, "Ai! I've paid attention to these stones and ignored the time!"

"Let's hurry down!" I answered.

He took me by the arm, saying, "No, that won't do, the nearest village is at least twenty to thirty *li* from here, all of it rough going like this." Then he added, "Ai! I never thought I'd spend the night up here with you!"

"Never mind," I said, trying to calm his anxiety, "if we really can't go down, let's make ourselves comfortable for the night." "Well," he said regretfully, "that's the way it will have to be!"

I suddenly found the situation quite amusing. These mountain comrades really were enthusiastic! He'd brought me up the mountain and couldn't get me down again. I felt a warm affection for him.

We sat facing each other for a while. As it became darker, the whole sky became bright with stars.

"Old Feng," he whispered, "are you afraid of wolves?"

"No, we've been all this way without even seeing one."

"But there are wolves, especially in this place," he said, and then continued, "but they are afraid of people. All wild animals are afraid of people. Don't worry about them, get a good sleep."

"And what about you? Aren't you going to sleep?"

"I don't sleep much at night anyway," he replied. "Besides, I had a sleep earlier today."

It was quite clear that he was intending to stay awake so that he could protect me. How could I let him stand guard over me all night? So I said, "I'm not sleepy either."

"Well," he said, "let's have it this way: let's both sleep. We're both dead tired after climbing mountain paths the whole afternoon."

He fumbled about for some wooden stakes, stuck them in the ground, untied the rope from his waist, and tied it to the stakes thus making a circle.

"What are you up to?" I asked.

Working away at the circle he answered, "Wolves are scared stiff of rope snares. All we have to do is tie loops of rope onto a circle, get inside and go to sleep, nothing could be safer."

"Fine," I said, "then let's both go to sleep."

We both squeezed into the small space within the rope snare and lay down to sleep. Before long he was snoring. Afraid of waking him, I lay there very still pretending to be asleep too. After twenty minutes or so he quietly got up, covered me with his jacket, picked up his manure fork and sat up on a rock. I burst out laughing.

Hearing my laugh, he joined in, asking, "Why! Aren't you asleep?"

I turned over, sat up and said, "Pan-shan! Let nobody guard anybody! We'll smoke a pipe of tobacco and talk over plans for developing this mountain district!"

We both lit our pipes, and right up there on the top of that Pingkuto Peak, we planned the future of our commune. Hai! That night the two of us really talked with enthusiasm! One proposition led to another. We ranged over a large number of projects from the building of a livestock farm to the making of canned food. We talked of setting up a phosphates plant, then of iron smelting, collecting medicinal herbs, building a mountain rest-house, a park and so on and so forth. The more we talked the more enthusiastic we became. Before we knew it we'd talked the night away.

Just before dawn I saw a lot of lights slowly gathering down by the foot of the eastern mountain. "What lights are those?" I asked.

"That's a secret," he laughed, "but I can tell it to you now." Pointing to the lights he said, "That place is called Gourd Ravine. It's just southeast of our village. There are steep mountains on both sides. The gorge of the mountains forms a bottle-neck, further back the ravine is shaped like a gourd, hence its name. The place is just perfect for a reservoir. One small dam could block the

rainwater from several mountains. A reservoir here could irrigate the land of several co-operatives down the hill, but it would not irrigate our own mountain land. That's why we haven't built the dam. Now, however, when we are to join the same commune, our members have declared: 'We'll give the people down below a present!' So they secretly started to build a reservoir! They've been working at it for several days. Just look, it's not even light yet and there they are at work already!"

I was moved to the very bottom of my heart. These mountain folk had truly poured out their riches for the sake of the commune. People had always said they were poor. Actually they weren't poor at all! With their unbounded, rich enthusiasm and determination they could achieve anything. As for our co-operative, we had a few tractors, a steam engine, and a donkey engine—all the result of the hard work of the people under the Party's leadership over the last two years. I thought of how I had boasted about those dairy cows of ours and my face burned with shame.

Seeing that I did not speak, Pan-shan moved closer to me. "Old Feng," he said, "what are you thinking of?"

"Guess."

"I'll guess with one guess!" he laughed. "You're thinking how our commune will some day develop agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry, fishery, and side occupations of all kinds. I'm thinking about that too. In the past we had very few people to help us and many precious things were lost! In the future we'll have more people and lots of strength, we'll certainly develop all these resources. Look, these few big mountains alone will be an invaluable treasure. 'So long as we have the mountain we will never lack firewood to burn,' as the saying goes. All we need is to get started!"

"Pan-shan," I said, "you haven't completely guessed right. I was thinking of the energy and enthusiasm of your people. Compared with these mountains it's much more precious, much bigger and much loftier!"

Pan-shan clasped me up in his arms.

As dawn approached and it gradually grew lighter, red clouds gathered in the eastern sky. The sounds of awakening villages echoed in the still morning air, cows mooed, the rhythmic thud of earth tampers and the chant of construction workers floated upwards. A huge red sun thrust upwards from the eastern horizon. From behind the mountains burst a million rays of brilliant golden light. We looked at the villages, the land, the crops, the newly built factories. How like they were to the newly risen sun, shining as the sun did with a million rays of golden light!

October 1959

Mother and Daughter

1

A conference of all the officers of the Chaohua People's Commune had just come to an end. Those from the various administrative districts and work brigades were putting their things together to go home when an announcement blared from the loudspeaker in the meeting-hall: "Calling Kao Hsiu-chen of Wenhsi! The commune Party committee wants you! Please stay behind!"

As this announcement was repeated, a woman froze to attention in one corner of the hall. She was a thin woman in her early forties, with a long, oval face and bright deep-set eyes. Two faint creases at the corners of her mouth gave her a motherly and dignified look.

This was Kao Hsiu-chen, chairman of the women's association of the Wenhsi Administrative District, who had been on the point of leaving with her colleagues. Now she turned to her husband Yang Cheng-hsiang, leader of the Wenhsi Brigade, to say: "The rest of you go along. The Party committee may have some work for me." She handed the bundle on her arm to her husband, who asked with some concern: "What will you do tonight if you can't get back?"

"That's no problem. Chu-chu has beds and quilts at the maternity home." She was turning to go when Yang

Cheng-hsiang hastily stuffed two pieces of steamed bread into her hand-bag.

In the commune Party office, the Party committee was still in a meeting. Hsiu-chen found a shady place under the eaves and sat down. She took out her notebook and painstakingly filled in the gaps she had left in her notes on the final report.

In a gust of laughter the Party meeting broke up. The first to come out cried: "Here's Kao Hsiu-chen! Tell her what she's wanted for." Secretary Hsu appeared and greeted her with a smile. "Kao Hsiu-chen! You've been drafted to another job again."

"What can an old woman like me do?" Hsiu-chen chuckled. "What are you giving me this time?"

"You old?" retorted Hsu. "Not a bit of it! Mu Kuei-ying[1] took the field even at fifty-three." He went on more seriously. "You know our commune's just started some factories including a distillery. The Party committee's decided to transfer you from your present post to manage the distillery."

Hsiu-chen's heart missed a beat. "For pity's sake!" she cried. "Why pick on me? You need know-how and a good bit of schooling for a job like that. How can a woman handle it?"

"You're to lead the work, not distil the wine," said Hsu. "In any case, there's nothing you can't learn. You learned the new method of delivery fast enough, so don't let this frighten you. If we think you'll do, you'll do! From now on we'll be branching out in all directions. Who says a woman can't manage a factory?"

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[1] A famous woman general of the Sung Dynasty.

Now Tien Yung-yi, the commune chairman and an old model worker, chipped in: "Just go ahead. You'll do fine. After working ten years or more for the revolution, can't you run a factory? You'll find it as easy as winking. You've a sharp tongue in your head, a good memory, and you don't do anything by halves. Besides, with the distillery in your own village you'll be close to your old man: the two of you can keep an eye on each other. Go ahead and soon we'll be drinking the wine you've brewed."

As the others laughed, Hsiu-chen threw back with a smile: "That you won't! That wine will be public property — I won't let you drink it."

"Taste it was all I meant."

"Not taste it either. With this one tasting and that one tasting, in no time half a litre would be gone."

Tien Yung-yi threw up his hands and cried: "Hear that! It's a watchdog like this we need as a director!" Hsiu-chen blushed as the others grinned.

Secretary Hsu explained to her the plans for the distillery as well as its present position, and she gladly accepted the task. But she asked: "Who'll take over the women's work in Wenhsi when I've gone?"

"Who do you think?" Hsu chuckled.

Hsiu-chen saw it in a flash. She gave the secretary a playful slap. "So! You're giving folk another chance to laugh at us! This will be the fourth time I've handed over to Chu-chu. She's a caution, that child!"

"Does she still call you 'Comrade Mum'?" demanded Tien Yung-yi loudly.

"Not now. But she says: 'Mum, the two of us will have to start criticizing each other more.' She gives me lessons in politics too."

Hsiu-chen walked off to a burst of appreciative laughter.

2

Leaving the commune Party committee building, Hsiu-chen made her way to the maternity home where her daughter was in charge. But Chu-chu was out. Hsiu-chen chatted for a while with some of the midwives, but did not wait for her daughter. Time was getting on: she must start back to Wenhsi.

It was the third month by the lunar calendar. On every side stretched fields of luxuriant green wheat, already higher than chopsticks. The bright yellow flowers of the rape gave off a delicious scent. The sky was a limpid blue as if swept clean of everything but the sun, which was throwing off countless golden rays of light.

As she walked along, Hsiu-chen's heart beat fast with happiness. The wheat on each side of the road seemed to be nodding to her, the rape flowers seemed to be smiling. Fish Bone Hill behind Wenhsi was trim with terraced fields. They had made those in the spring of the Big Leap and the white imprints of mattocks could still be seen on the ridges — well, this year they'd have wheat to show for their work! In the gullies glittered the emerald waves of the small reservoirs they had built. Below one reservoir red brick buildings were going up for the commune's distillery and paper mill.

Hsiu-chen thought over all the changes she had seen, the still better times to come. For ten years now she had been travelling this road between Wenhsi and the town of Chaohua to report on her work, to buy the first donkey for the co-operative, to deliver babies, to celebrate Women's Day. . . . Yes, many times she had trodden this road, and each time with a lifting of her heart.

She smiled reminiscently over her first meeting in the township. It was in 1949, soon after liberation, when the district government had its seat in Chaohua and the villagers had just started settling scores with local tyrants. A woman called Chou Yai had been sent to help them. She was putting up with Hsiu-chen and treated her like a sister, finally persuading her to take part in the village work. That was when her husband was so angry with her. He had heard a rumour that women who went to meetings always asked for a divorce. He dared not say anything to Chou Yai, but he fumed and glared at his wife.

One day notice came of a rally of the most active poor peasants at Chaohua. There would be three days of meetings — and her name was on the list to go! For the first time in her life she would be sleeping away from home. Her husband made a big scene. He grabbed her bedding-roll and roared:

"You're running off! Tell the truth now!" Tears stood in his eyes.

"Why should I run off? I shall be back to have it out with the landlord. I've two children, haven't I? I'm just going to some meetings. Mercy! — how petty-minded can a man be?"

Her sister-in-law took Yang Cheng-hsiang's side.

"Going to a meeting, are you? Messing about with men, I call it! Who's going to cook for you, I'd like to know? Don't expect me to do it."

At that Hsiu-chen broke down and cried. But then Chu-chu ran up to her. She was a harum-scarum of twelve or so. But she said: "Mum, you go to your meeting. I'll cook for you for three days."

"Are you sure you can manage?" Her mother's heart warmed to her.

"I can make potato cakes and soup. What I can't manage is noodles." Looking into the child's wide black eyes, Hsiu-chen's own eyes were moist. "Come on then, Chu-chu. I'll show you." Taking the girl into the kitchen, she initiated her into noodle-making. That was the first time she handed over to Chu-chu.

So she went to town. At the beginning she couldn't help worrying about her family. Had the stove gone out? Were they getting three meals a day? Later on, she managed to set these worries aside. And on the fourth morning she went back to Wenhsi. From a distance she saw smoke rising from every chimney — their own chimney included! — and her heart lightened.

Stepping eagerly into the yard she found it deserted: they must all have gone to the fields. She tiptoed to the kitchen window and peeped in. There was Chu-chu in a short white apron standing on a stool in front of the stove. She had noodles in one hand and was carefully lowering them into the pan.

Hsiu-chen laughed at the sight, but two tears rolled down her cheeks. She hurried in and hugged her daughter to her.

As she took over the noodles she asked Chu-chu:

"Has your dad said anything these days?"

"I'll say he has!" Chu-chu loved to tell a story. "The day before yesterday when I took his food to the fields, before eating a bite he told me: 'Your mum won't be coming back, Chu-chu. She's no use for you. She's no use for her old man. You'll be motherless from now on.'" Chu-chu hit her father off to the life, and Hsiu-chen chuckled. "What did you say?" she asked.

"I told him: 'Don't worry, Dad. Mum will be back. She can't do without Sis and me. She can't do without

you.' Then Dad asked: 'Did she tell you that?' I told him: 'Sure!' So I tricked him into eating several big bowls."

"You didn't trick him, silly. Aren't I here as large as life? Go and fetch your dad home to eat." Chu-chu skipped off, and once out of the gate started calling at the top of her voice.

When Yang Cheng-hsiang came back, he couldn't wipe the grin off his face. He never lost his temper with her again. On the contrary, he seemed fonder of her than before. When the peasants' association was set up he was one of the first to join.

During land reform Hsiu-chen was elected chairman of the Wenhsi Women's Association and was busier than ever. By then Chu-chu was nearly sixteen and could take a lot of the housework off her mother's shoulders. She notified the women of meetings, too, and delivered messages. That was the year when Hsiu-chen joined the Chinese Communist Party and Chu-chu joined the Youth League. In 1952, when land reform was completed and the county wanted to popularize modern methods of midwifery, Hsiu-chen was sent to the district to head the maternity home. Chu-chu was elected in her place as chairman of the women's association.

She could still remember the evening before she went to the county town to study. She was sitting in the village office with Chu-chu opposite.

"Chu-chu!" she said. "I'm going to the county to study and handing all this work over to you."

"I know, Mum. You can go with an easy mind." Chu-chu spoke with all confidence.

"What does work with the women mean?" Hsiu-chen catechized her.

Chu-chu started counting on her fingers. "Calling them to meetings, keeping the place clean, going on with literacy classes, smoothing over family troubles, getting people inoculated against disease. We must see that women aren't put upon or beaten. We mustn't let the men bully them! . . ."

Her mother laughed as Chu-chu reeled off these items. "It'll take all night if you go on at that rate."

"Well, what would you say?"

"Look at you! All you can do is rush about in every direction. You fly around with messages fast enough. But from now on as chairman of the women's association you'll have to use your head too. Work with the women means taking a real interest in them, taking an interest in each woman in each family. Help them to understand better. Organize them to work. When some big job comes along just rely on the Party. The Party will help you and you must do the work it gives you. . . ."

"I know!" Chu-chu put in. "And we mustn't let those two mutual-aid teams in our village break down either."

"That's right. It's not just a question of those two mutual-aid teams: you must explain to the women why mutual aid and co-operation are good. It's a question of which road we peasants are to take—that's not a small matter."

Though Chu-chu stuck her tongue out slyly at the time, later she worked with a will. Sometimes at meetings or when trying to talk women round, she imitated her mother's methods and mannerisms.

Hsiu-chen worked for three whole years in the maternity home. In 1955 the new methods of delivery were to be applied throughout the district. The maternity home had to train another set of midwives. From village to village

Hsiu-chen went, explaining the new methods, urging that they should be adopted everywhere. And she assembled the chairmen of the women's associations from each village to watch a delivery. Then Chu-chu started learning midwifery from her mother.

That spring the county had organized a training course in hygiene which included learning the new methods of delivery. Those joining the class had to reach the standard of primary school graduates, and Wenhsi sent Chu-chu to study there. She came back in the middle of the high tide of co-operation, when the six villages in Wenhsi combined into one big agricultural producers' co-operative. As a strong woman co-operative chairman was needed, Hsiu-chen was elected to the job. Chu-chu, just back from the training class, was given her mother's old position as director of the maternity home.

That was the second time she took over Hsiu-chen's work.

This time her mother had no qualms about it. In the training class Chu-chu had mastered all the new terms, had learned to use a stethoscope and to give injections. In fact she knew more than her mother. And she always threw herself whole-heartedly into her work. One thing only worried Hsiu-chen. For an unmarried girl in her late teens it might not look too well to be a midwife. Chu-chu's fiancé, studying in middle school, would probably have no objection. But the old folk in his family mightn't like it. And sure enough, one day Chu-chu's future father-in-law came to Hsiu-chen and said: "Your girl's growing up. Why not find her something else to do?"

When Hsiu-chen went home and told Chu-chu, the girl lost her temper. "Is this work something to be ashamed

of?" she demanded. "A lot of feudal nonsense! Let me go and see the old man!" Her bobbed hair flapped as she whisked off.

Her fiancé's family lived at the east end of the village. Chu-chu's mother gave chase, calling to her, but Chu-chu did not stop. As luck would have it she ran into her future father-in-law standing by his threshing-floor.

She went boldly up to him, crying: "Dad! You're at home! There's something I want to discuss with you."

The old man turned rather red to hear that this chit of a girl had something to "discuss" with him. He grunted, looked away and said: "Go on."

Hsiu-chen, too embarrassed to join them, kept out of sight round the corner.

"Dad!" she heard Chu-chu say. "This is something we must get clear. Because some day we'll be one family and we don't want any unpleasantness, do we?"

With another grunt, the old man said: "That's right."

"It's my job I'm talking about," Chu-chu continued. "No one can say being a midwife means losing face. We mustn't look at things the old way. All the nurses in the big hospital in town are young girls and no one sees anything wrong in that. We all start life as babies. In the old days in these parts out of ten children born only five or six lived, but with the new method of delivery they're all born alive — mother and baby come through fit and strong. The mortality rate's down to four per cent. Do you know what that means? Out of a hundred children born, only four die! This is a wonderful thing for everyone. What disgrace do you see in it, Dad?"

During this clear and incisive speech by Chu-chu, her future father-in-law's cheeks burned and he kept nodding his head. When she had finished he tugged his beard

and chuckled: "You're right there. . . . Well, I never minded anyway."

Hsiu-chen, just round the corner, had noted her daughter's confident tone, her sensible, tactful approach. She felt a sudden pang of envy. How lucky the girls nowadays were — they could go anywhere, say anything! She had been sold to the Yang family as a child bride and worked there like a mute for thirteen years without daring to speak to Yang Cheng-hsiang. But Chu-chu's generation had been born at a happier time.

She heard Chu-chu conclude: "All right then, Dad, I must be going. Drop in for some tea when you've time."

The old man nodded and grunted twice. Hsiu-chen could not smother a laugh.

When Chu-chu ran back and discovered her mother, she announced with a smile: "I told him, Mum, and he says he doesn't mind."

Her mother frowned in mock severity. "You've got a nerve."

"Who — me? He's human, so am I. If the Party has a job for me, nobody's going to stop me doing it. I'm not afraid of him." She grinned mischievously at her mother.

For several years Hsiu-chen had been chairman of the co-operative. At the beginning of the Big Leap, Wenhsi district launched a big drive for water conservancy and afforestation. Led by the Party secretary, Hsiu-chen joined in this movement with all the able-bodied men and women in the co-op. By dint of working hard all winter and spring, they had built several small reservoirs and opened up over seven hundred *mou* of terraced fields. When a commune was formed, Wenhsi became one of its administrative districts. This time they pooled all their

labour forces for half a month to plant saplings on Shaoshih Hill, bare for long years.

Now when Hsiu-chen travelled this road and saw closely-planted saplings covering the slope like an emerald sunshade, crops springing from the terraced fields, she felt a great warmth and sweetness in her heart. In the old days when they climbed to gather brambles for fuel, she had hated the hills because they were so high and ugly. Today, though, they put her in mind of a small girl's hair— you could braid it and comb it as you liked, and prettify it in any way you pleased!

3

Dusk was falling as Hsiu-chen got back to Wenhsi.

On her way home, she dropped in here and there to check up on the work. It was dark when she reached home.

Yang Cheng-hsiang, back from a meeting, asked with a smile:

"Well, Mum, what job has the Party committee given you this time?"

"You may well ask. I've been transferred to something quite different."

"What is it? Eh?"

"Guess!"

"Now that we're a commune it might be anything; industry, agriculture, defence, education, commerce, I can't guess." He slapped his head.

Hsiu-chen crowed with laughter. "I'm a factory manager! They're drafting me to this distillery in our commune."

"Well! Can you handle that?" Her husband stared.

"One can always learn. If I keep running to the Party for advice, I'll manage."

Her husband grinned broadly. "You've really changed your job this time. I'm still at the same old farming. We'll have to grow some good sweet potatoes for your distillery." They both laughed.

Presently he asked: "Who'll be taking over the women's work in our district?"

"Who but our Chu-chu?"

"I thought so!" Yang laughed. "Trust her to follow where her mother leads!"

Hsiu-chen said softly: "And I just follow where the Party leads!"

Bright and early the next morning, Chu-chu swept home like a whirlwind from Chaohua. Flushed and breathless, her short fringe moist against her perspiring forehead, she bounded in through the gate.

"Mum!" she called. "Mum! Where's Mum?" All the bamboo curtains rattled as she searched the house.

"You baggage!" scolded Hsiu-chen. "Must you shout as if you were summoning my spirit?[1] I'm here!"

As she stepped into the yard, Chu-chu gave way to a sudden fit of laughter and collapsed, shaking with merriment, to the ground.

"What are your instructions, Madam Chairman?" asked Hsiu-chen.

"Mum!" Chu-chu still shook with laughter. "You know who decided I should take over your work? I suggested it myself to Secretary Hsu! I had to ask several times before he'd agree."

[1] In feudal China when someone died, relatives sometimes went through the ceremony of calling back the spirit.

"You little devil! You were doing nicely at the maternity home. Why should you ask to come back here?"

"Catch me staying out there! Last year when you had your Big Leap, building reservoirs and sowing high-yield crops, I nearly burst with envy. Now hand over! Look at my hands — how soft they've grown. I've been dying to get back to the land. I've been so bored at the maternity home."

"That's a fine way to talk! What did you tell your father-in-law, may I ask!"

"Things were different then. Now there are plenty of trained midwives at the home."

"All right. Don't waste my time. Come on! Take over the work."

Chu-chu produced her notebook. "That's what I've been waiting for!"

Mother and daughter sat in the yard, each with a notebook in her hand, to make over the work. Hsiu-chen told Chu-chu how many nurseries the district had, how many sewing machines, who headed the different women's work-teams, which of them were Party members, which Youth Leaguers, and just how the work was going. She went into great detail and Chu-chu carefully noted it all down. This took them until noon.

When the handing over was finished, Hsiu-chen told her daughter: "Chu-chu, this work isn't simple: it's not like in the co-op in the old days. You can't be too easy-going, you've a big responsibility. Keep in close touch with the Party and get all the help you can from it. Think of the size of this district with more than a dozen villages — you mustn't be afraid of leg work. The more trust folk have in us and in the Party, the more concern we ought to show for them. Women are a force to be reckoned with now

in production. Then there are the nurseries — they're very important. Don't let things slide; mind you see they're well run!"

She spoke as if preparing her daughter for her wedding. With a solemn face and eyes fastened on her mother, Chu-chu nodded.

When business was over they started laughing and joking.

Chu-chu looked at the old-fashioned, cumbersome coil in which Hsiu-chen wore her hair. "Mum, you're going to be a factory manager! You can't go on wearing your hair in a bun. Here, let me cut it off for you."

As she flew for the scissors, Hsiu-chen jumped to her feet and laughed. "You little fiend! I shall wear it to suit myself. You can't expect a woman nearing fifty to go round with a bobtail like you. I do all right as I am."

"You don't have to wear it as short as we do, Mum. I'll cut it just below your ears. A couple of days ago some visitors came from Peking to see our maternity home, and the women your age had short hair — it looked ever so nice." She flourished the scissors.

"Get away with you!" Hsiu-chen warded her off. "Not for me."

"You're in industry now, remember. You're a factory manager."

"What if I am? I've talked to the special commissioner, I've talked to the provincial governor — why should I cut my hair to run a factory?" She covered her hair with her hands.

"All right. All right." Chu-chu put down the scissors. "Have it your own way." She went off.

After lunch Hsiu-chen was roused from her nap by a sound of clipping near her ears. She sat up with a start — too late! Chu-chu had cut off her hair. Feeling her head, she scolded with a smile: "You little baggage, Chu-chu! You've really cut it! I'll give you a thrashing!"

Bent double with laughter, Chu-chu answered: "Have a look in the mirror, Mum! It's ever so much prettier!"

"I'll teach you to prettify me!" Hsiu-chen gave chase, and with a scream of laughter Chu-chu rushed outside.

Yang Cheng-hsiang in the other room was woken by the noise. He called:

"What's all the excitement?"

Hsiu-chen went laughing to the door. "Look! Your baggage of a daughter has gone and cut my hair."

Her husband stared, and a smile dawned on his face. "It suits you, Mum! You look good—years younger!"

"Do I really look younger?" Hsiu-chen picked up a mirror. Yang stepped over and said:

"Just see for yourself. You look at least ten years younger!"

September 1959

Sowing the Clouds

1

This spring we went to the Jade Mountain People's Commune. Walking down the road, we were caught in a scattered shower. "Spring rain is more precious than oil," as the saying goes. Already chopstick high and growing steadily, the young wheat drank its fill of the misty rain. Slowly, each sprout unfolded two green and tender leaves.

Everyone took shelter under an open thatched shed by the side of the road. Talking and laughing, the peasants discussed this good rain as they shook the drops from their umbrellas or removed their tunics to dry them in the breeze. The little shed was soon very lively and very crowded.

It was coming down hard now, and a girl dashed in from the road. She must have been about eighteen or nineteen. Tall, the wet clothes plastered to her body made her look even taller and accentuated her strong healthy lines. Purity and firmness shone in her handsome eyes. Not bothering to wring the water from her garments or scrape the mud from her feet, she merely brushed from her forehead a few dripping locks of jet black hair. Selecting a spot beneath the edge of the roof that was just out of the rain, she stood there silently.

A couple of golden clouds appeared in the sky and the rain stopped. Everyone poured out of the shed like water

from a sluice gate and hurried back to the road. Only the girl didn't move. She hesitated, stepped deeper into the shed, then shouted:

"More rain's coming, comrades!"

But by then everyone had rolled up his trouser-legs and was hastening on. Very few people heard her. Sure enough, before they had gone two hundred paces, a fury of raindrops pelted down, like beans pouring out of a sieve.

Laughing, everyone came running back to the shed and again crowded in under its thatched roof. Because they didn't take evenly spaced positions, the shed seemed more packed than before. Moving slightly to make room for others, the girl resumed her stand by the edge of the shed. Although she still said nothing, everyone had noticed her by now, and several people struck up a conversation with her.

"How did you know it was going to rain again, Sis?"

"Those golden clouds we saw just now were 'shower clouds'."

"How much longer is it going to last?" Everyone had quieted down now and was listening.

"Not very long. This is morning rain. It'll clear by the afternoon," the girl replied in an offhand manner.

"There's a lot of rain here in spring," someone said.

"No, there isn't," the girl contradicted. "Last year from the first to the twelfth of April we had no rain at all. But on the thirteenth, exactly the same date as today, we had fifty millimetres."

"What about the fourteenth?" a young man asked her deliberately.

"Clear, becoming cloudy."

"And the fifteenth?"

"Overcast, with a strong southwest wind in the afternoon."

"And the sixteenth?" The young man seemed determined to see it through to the end.

"Clear. There was no more rain till the seventh of June, when we had ten millimetres."

The girl's answers were quite effortless. Her memory was remarkable. The statistics of a year before were right on the tip of her tongue. Everyone gaped at this methodical girl, and more people began questioning her.

"Are you a meteorologist?" someone asked her.

"That's right," she replied simply. "I'm the meteorologist at the weather forecasting station of our people's commune."

"Where did you get such a good memory?" someone else queried.

The girl blushed. She couldn't think of a suitable reply.

No one asked her any more. The talk turned to this year's wheat. But everyone was thinking: "That girl is remarkable!"

The rain stopped. In the experimental high-yield fields the wheat shimmered greenly translucent in the sunlight. Raindrops like mercury rolled slowly down the wheat leaves and dropped onto the soft earth. Everyone walked on. Our group shouldered our luggage and proceeded to the management committee of the people's commune. We were received by Comrade Kuan Tien-chi, secretary of the commune Party committee. A cheery man in his forties, he was extremely straightforward and enthusiastic. He spoke emphatically.

"How much wheat are we planting here this year?" we asked him.

"Over seventy-four thousand *mou*." Kuan smiled. "This year we started collecting fertilizer early. Seventy per cent of our fields have already had three top-dressings."

His precise earnest way of talking reminded us of the girl we had met in the roadside shed. Evidently all the cadres and people around here were practical and down to earth. At the time we didn't know that the girl belonged to this particular commune. The next day, when Secretary Kuan was showing us around one of the production brigades, we ran into her outside the village.

She was at her "observatory", noting the marks in her temperature recording box. When she saw us, she smiled and asked: "Did you get caught in any more rain that day?"

"No," we said. "Are you the meteorologist of this commune?"

"Yes!" she replied with a laugh.

"This is Hsiao Shu-ying," said the secretary. "She does her work very well. She's one of the 'Red Flag Bearers' for the entire province. Everyone has a lot of confidence in her."

Our respect for the girl increased. Later, when our cadres' conference was concluded, we went to call on her in her weather station. This is what she told us.

2

"Where shall I start?" she asked.

"Start from the rain we got caught in the other day!" we said.

She laughed. "That day a comrade asked me how I got such a good memory? Concentration! Actually, my mem-

ory used to be pretty bad. My ma was always scolding me for losing things. I think everybody's memory's about the same. It all depends what you concentrate on. In the winter of '58 our commune sent me to the provincial capital for a course in meteorology. Before I left, Secretary Kuan said to me, 'Shu-ying, work hard on this course. Our commune is in a mountain region, on the edge of the county and on the border of the province. Today our people's communes do large-scale collective production, and they must have weather stations. So make sure you come home with the goods!'

"I didn't even know what 'meteorology' meant at the time. But since the Party committee was sending me, I knew it must be necessary. We were striding ahead in all branches of our work, so there was no use saying the course might be too hard. I decided I'd just go and then see what I'd see. We were smelting iron out of the rocks on Jade Mountain — you could see that people were capable of big things!

"I arrived in the provincial capital on New Year's Day. The course began right after the holiday. I took one look at my classmates and my heart began to flutter. They were all primary school and junior middle school graduates. The only thing I had ever graduated from was a quick literacy course. The trouble with those was that you learned to read pretty well, but you wrote too slowly. Your hand just couldn't move fast enough, and the fountain pen felt as if it weighed a few hundred catties.

"The first day of the meteorology class I tried to take notes like the others. But how could I! My characters were as big as dates. I couldn't get down more than three words out of every sentence. An icy northeast wind was blowing outside, but my forehead was damp with sweat.

"That night I was very worried. Though we were all so busy at the commune, I was sent out to study. But at this rate what would I learn? How could I do any weather forecasting when I got back? I remembered what the Party secretary had told me, and what my pa had said, and the more I thought the worse I felt. I wondered whether to write and ask the commune to send someone in my place, but our commune was far away. It would take half a month to get a reply. It seemed pretty hopeless. But then, suddenly an idea struck me, and my brain seemed to clear. Well, if I slow in writing, I thought, why don't I use my head?

"The next day in class I didn't try to take any notes. I concentrated on listening, straining to remember every word. You needn't laugh. That was how I started training my memory.

"What I memorized during the day I wrote down in my notebook, word for word, at night. Sometimes I rewrote my notes two or three times — anyhow it was good writing practice and I had a nice bright electric lamp. Some nights the other students went to the movies, but I stayed home. Or they took a stroll through the streets, but I never went with them. In the two months I spent in the provincial capital I never even discovered where the big department store was.

"I kept on that way for a month. I managed to write everything down all right, only my eyes got a little bit red from staying up late. When the Party secretary of the training course found out what I was doing, he told the teacher to give me special help. I was really embarrassed. The teacher had to repeat every lecture just for me. But then I thought — it's all for the cause of the Party. My job is just to plug away at my studies.

"By the third lunar month, the training course was over. I never expected it, but I came out first in my class. If it hadn't been for the Party, how would I have been able to get this knowledge?

"I hadn't been home for nearly three months, but I certainly thought about it. Especially about my ma and Orchid. Orchid and I are great friends. A few years ago we always wore tunics of the same flowered cloth, and plaited our braids in the same way. Though we're both grown up now, we still like to chat together. I was also curious to know what changes there'd been in our people's commune these last few months.

"I arrived in the county seat on the fourth, and rushed back to the commune the first thing the following morning. The moment I crossed the big dyke, my heart swelled. In the distance I could see our commune's red flag and the tall sails of the windmill on the western flats. The peach trees we had planted the year before last were pink with blossom; they circled the village in a rosy cloud. The wheat in the fields was plump and green. When the breeze blew it rippled like a sea. To one side of the village was a long swath of golden rape. It really was a pretty scene.

"I love to see our crops. They're always changing. Every time you come home from a trip they put on a different dress. Now they're green and shiny, but in another couple of weeks they'll be a beautiful golden yellow.

"As I gazed around, I heard a whip snapping in the willow grove. From the sound of it I knew that my big brother was coming with his horse cart. I yelled to him and, sure enough, it was he.

"You don't know my big brother. He's the leader of our youth brigade. He's tall and dark, so we call him

Bronze Hammer. He's a wonderful worker, and he's very direct. But his ideas were still a little backward.

" 'Well? What did you learn in the provincial capital?' he asked.

" 'I learned to predict the weather!' I told him. 'It's very important. . . .'

" 'Shu-ying,' he interrupted, 'the way I see it, the main thing for us young people in this big leap forward is just to work wonders.'

" 'But there's all kinds of work to be done!' I told him, but I couldn't convince him. We quarrelled all the way home. As we came down the dyke, I saw a line of people approaching from the village, pushing wooden-wheeled carts. When they drew closer, I recognized them — the members of the commune Party committee were going out to work in the fields. Secretary Kuan, Secretary Liu, Commune Chairman Chang, Section Chief Hsu . . . each trundling a cart of manure. I hastily jumped from the cart and ran forward. Secretary Kuan and Chairman Chang saw me first, and their faces lit up. Secretary Kuan shouted: 'Hey! Our little sky observation scout is back!'

" 'Did you have any trouble with the course, Shu-ying?' Commune Chairman Chang asked me.

" 'Yes,' I said, 'but the people there helped me.' I had heard that when a person comes back from a study course or a conference, he's supposed to give a report. So I pulled out my batch of notebooks right there on the road and asked: 'Shall I start my report?'

"Secretary Kuan laughed. 'Wait till we get to the fields. This minute, we're pretty busy with these carts.'

"I had to laugh too. After three months of not touching a cart, my hands were itching. I pulled one away from Chairman Chang and trotted with it into the fields.

"We halted beneath a willow and Secretary Kuan and the others listened to my report. Everyone got very excited. Secretary Kuan wrote down in his notebook some of the weather signals I had learned, like 'when the flag stirs on the pole — gentle breeze', and 'when the telephone wires moan — fresh wind'. He asked me:

" 'Is it the idea of the provincial authorities that we should set up our own weather station?'

" 'They said that each place should act according to its own situation. If the conditions are right, then set one up.'

" 'We'll do it!' Secretary Kuan exclaimed after thinking a moment. 'We're a mountain district here, our weather is complicated and we're on the borders of both the county and the province. Sometimes their forecasts are correct for the county or the province as a whole, but they're not necessarily right for us. We find it difficult to take the initiative in our agricultural production. We need a weather station — the sooner the better!'

"The Party committee attached such importance to meteorological work, I felt that everything had already been said. But not all comrades agreed. Section Chief Hsu didn't altogether go along with the idea. 'It's not so easy to run a meteorological station,' he said. 'We haven't any equipment.'

"Secretary Kuan was firm. He said, 'We can't wait any longer. This year we've planted thousands of *mou* of wheat. All must be watered three times and fertilized five. We're aiming for an average of four hundred catties per *mou*! A lot will dopend on accurate weather forecasting. We can't guarantee a bumper crop without it. We'll think of some way to get equipment. If we hold out our hand and wait for it to be given to us, we won't be able to move an inch. If we do things ourselves, we can go flying ahead. I don't

see why we can't set up a weather station in a big commune like ours!'

"And so, our commune decided to establish an observatory within the next ten days. I went home and told my ma and pa, and they also supported the idea. My pa is very progressive! He's called Hsiao Kuan. He's in charge of our commune's storehouse. He joined the Communist Party in 1951 and was the chairman of the peasants' association. Though past sixty, he sees things very clearly. The year before last a theatrical troupe in the city put out a call for actors, and someone suggested that I take the test. But Pa wouldn't let me go. 'It's not that I'm feudal,' he said. 'I'm keeping her in the country so that she can become a tractor driver. It seems to me it won't be long before we have mechanized agriculture.' So you see how farsighted he is.

"When I told my ma that I had been learning meteorology, she didn't know what it was. My pa told her: 'It's taking over from the Old Lord of the Sky. It's controlling the heavens and controlling the earth. It's regulating the wind and the rain.'

"My ma laughed and said: 'I never thought our girl would have such a big job!'

"We set up a temperature recording box, a wind direction finder and a rain gauge on the outside platform of the Dragon King Temple. We made all the instruments in our commune. The temperature box was built of the wood of an old crate my ma gave me. We gave it a coat of white paint and it looked as good as a store-bought one. All we lacked was a picket fence, but we couldn't find enough lumber. Just as I was worrying over that problem, Secretary Kuan came along.

" 'What do we need a fence for?' he asked.

" 'Keep out the pigs and chickens and ducks. Also to prevent the kids from getting in and messing round with the instruments.'

" 'That's easy.' He trotted off to the east fields and soon came panting back with six big bundles of sorghum stalks. He dumped them on the ground and said: 'Here. I'll help you build a fence. We'll see whether it'll serve the purpose.' He rolled up his sleeves and started weaving. In only a morning's time, the fence was finished. It was neat and pretty. 'You see, Shu-ying,' Secretary Kuan said to me. 'This is fine, isn't it? That's how our commune has to do things. Live frugally even though we're prospering. Every cent, every inch of lumber we can save, adds that much strength to our country.'

"Those words of Secretary Kuan taught me a lot."

3

"After setting up our instruments on the temple platform, the commune wrote a big placard reading 'Sky Observatory' and hung it high above the fence gate. That got the whole village talking.

"Some said, 'It's to scan the heavens for signs, like Chukeh Liang.'[1]

"Others said, 'They're going to watch the Soviet sputniks!'

"When people found out that I was the meteorologist, they kept coming up to me. I had only to come out of the house and people would approach me on the street and ask:

[1] A famous statesman and strategist in the Three Kingdoms period (A.D. 220-280) who understood meteorology and made use of the weather in battle.

" 'Is today going to be clear or overcast?'

" 'Is it going to rain tomorrow?'

"Especially the members of the youth brigade. They never had much to say to me before, but now any one of them might question me two or three times a day. Even the primary school kids, the moment we met, would all begin yelling questions.

"I was very tense those first few days. Secretary Kuan had told me I was to start formally issuing forecasts on the tenth. I hadn't made any analyses yet, so whenever anybody asked me about the weather, I couldn't answer. It got so that I didn't dare show myself on the main street. I travelled only through back lanes. Even so, it was no use. Well-to-do middle peasants made sarcastic remarks. They said: 'The stage has been set, the drums and gongs are ready—why doesn't the actor come out and sing?'

"When I heard that, I decided to try a weather forecast on the quiet! Otherwise I wouldn't know what to say. Every day, according to what I observed, I forecast the weather. The first three days the weather was clear, and my predictions were right, but I didn't tell anyone. On the fourth day, the situation changed. I forecast a cold wave from the north with probable hail! But the county weather station only said showers. What am I going to do? I thought. I'm still new at this thing. Shall I tell the Party committee? I went to see Orchid. She's the announcer in our commune loudspeaker network station. When I told her, she asked:

" 'Can you have hail in spring?'

"I said, 'According to my prediction you can.'

" 'Forget it,' she said. 'The Party committee hasn't asked you to start forecasting until the tenth. Besides, the county observatory hasn't said anything about hail.'

"I took her advice and didn't report to the Party committee. But that was a boner. That night in the middle of a thunderstorm, it started to hail, and the blossoms on our apple trees were ruined, and many of the fish fry we were raising were killed in the pond.

"I didn't know at first. When I got up early the next morning to check the rain gauge I saw a crowd of people around the fish pond. I went over and took a look. There was Secretary Kuan and Old Wei, who was in charge of the pond, scooping out the dead fish fry. No one was saying a word.

"Secretary Kuan saw me and said: 'You see, Shu-ying, the hail last night killed a lot of little fish. We must start weather forecasting on the tenth! Our commune is doing farming, forestry, animal husbandry, side-occupations and fishery. We must know the weather for every one of these enterprises.'

"When Secretary Kuan said that, I could feel my face burn. I was very ashamed. I had known it was going to happen, but because I was shy and didn't have a strong sense of responsibility I hadn't said anything to the Party committee. If I had, mats could have been put over the pond and we wouldn't have lost any fish fry. The more I thought about it, the worse I felt.

" 'Secretary Kuan,' I said, 'my weather forecast yesterday showed hail for last night!'

" 'What! You knew?'

" 'Yes, but I was careless. I didn't say anything about it.'

"Secretary Kuan didn't say a word. He only glared at me. He didn't criticize me. I would have felt better if he did. After this lesson, I understood how I ought to do my job.

"After clearing out the dead fish fry, Secretary Kuan said to me: 'Shu-ying, starting tomorrow our commune's weather station will make forecasts. The sooner you get going, the better. You don't have to wait until the tenth.'

" 'That's what I've been thinking.'

" 'Are you having any difficulties?'

" 'No.' My mouth said I wasn't having any difficulties, but the Old Lord of the Sky seemed to be going out of his way to give me some. The very first day of my forecasting, I ran into a terrible mess.

"That day, according to all my calculations, the weather for the following day would be: 'Clear, with moderate north wind rising about nine in the morning and becoming strong in the afternoon. Wind subsiding at night, followed by frost!' The problem was—if we were going to have frost, protective measures would have to be taken for the crops; but suppose my forecast was wrong? I thought and thought, and finally I decided I would act on the facts as I saw them. I handed a report of my findings to the Party committee.

"Section Chief Hsu read it first. He looked at me and said: 'Ha! Frost, eh? This is no small matter. Are you sure?'

" 'Yes.' My heart was beating fast.

"Secretary Kuan then took a look at my report. After a long time he said decisively: 'If frost is coming, we'll have to prevent it! Make a note of this. Tomorrow afternoon order all-out frost prevention.'

"Section Chief Hsu said: 'Ah, she's only a girl. . . .'

" 'Since we've set up a meteorological station, we have to trust the meteorologist. We've nothing else to go on. Give the forecast to the loudspeaker network,' said Secretary Kuan.

"'Secretary Kuan spoke in his usual tone, but his words seemed to me to be enormously heavy. If you had dropped them they probably would have knocked a hole in the ground.

"I took my report and flew to the broadcasting room. Orchid looked at the forecast, then opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue in dismay. She said: 'You know, Shu-ying, once we broadcast this thing, tens of thousands of people will be sent out to fight the frost!'

" 'I know,' I said. 'You just go ahead and broadcast it.'

"Our weather forecast office was in the next room, and as I leaned against the table I could hear Orchid's voice through the wall. When she said: 'And now, here is the weather forecast from the Jade Mountain People's Commune's own weather station: Tomorrow morning, moderate north wind. . . .' I felt quite elated. I thought: Our pocket in the mountains has its own meteorological station at last.

"The trouble came the next day. I got up early and hurried on my rounds. There wasn't a bit of wind stirring. Even the leaves on the trees were motionless. Ah, I thought, what a nuisance; where's that moderate wind? I was afraid to meet anyone who might question me, so rushed back to my station. I kept my eyes glued on the wind velocity meter. Right up until breakfast time, there wasn't a breath of wind.

"I didn't feel like eating, and I didn't dare go out to meet people. They'd ask me all sorts of things. What could I say? *Ai*! When you're scared, the wolf is sure to come! It was just my luck to meet my gabby sister-in-law. She's in charge of our brigade's windmill flour grinder. Standing in the compound, she stuck her neck out and

shouted across to me: 'Hey, Shu-ying, any wind today? We want to know whether to bring the grain to the mill!'

"She's got a loud voice, and it really carries. People could hear her two blocks away. What did she care how upset I was?

"I rushed over to her and said: 'Sister, you're yelling loud enough to call the soul out of my body!' I was pretty agitated. My sister-in-law said: 'I've got to use the wind. The Old Lord of the Sky is our roller-pushing donkey. But that old donkey is too untractable!' She laughed heartily.

"Just then, a well-to-do middle peasant named Fan Fu-hsing walked by. His nickname is 'The Tease'. He loves to make sarcastic remarks. At that time he was always making cracks about the new techniques we were introducing on our farm. He came over to me and said:

" 'I hear you want to become a Chukeh Liang and forecast the future. You even claim there'll be wind today!'

" 'Yes. We'll have a moderate wind this morning.'

" 'What!' He pretended to look at the sky in surprise. 'How come I can't see it!' Some old men standing around laughed.

"One of them said: 'She's only a girl. How could she know anything!'

" 'If a person knew the business of the Old Lord of the Sky,' said another, 'he'd be a heavenly spirit!'

"Everyone was passing remarks and there still was no breeze. My heart felt as if it was being clawed by a cat. But I put on a calm air. 'Man isn't supernatural,' I explained. 'But man can master science, and that makes him stronger than the spirits. There will be wind today. Wait and see.'

"It certainly was a coincidence. Just as I said that, we heard the red flag suddenly start to flap on the pole outside the Party committee office. My heart seemed to leap! Fan the Tease was in the middle of snorting: 'Science! Who ever heard of—' But before he could get the words out of his mouth, a big gust of wind blew the straw hat off his head and sent it rolling along the ground. As he raced after it, people on the street clapped their hands gleefully.

"Don't laugh, the best is yet to come! After lunch, the wind blew harder. Suddenly the loudspeakers went on. It was the Party secretary's voice, ordering the frost prevention measures. He said: 'Comrades of every administrative district, production brigade, pasture field and orchard. There's going to be a frost tonight. To guarantee this year's bumper wheat crop, we've got to defeat the frost. Every brigade must immediately prepare piles of straw to burn for smokescreens. All the straw must be delivered to the fields before nine o'clock tonight. Each administrative district must appoint men to see to it that this directive is carried out.'

"The order really brought on an avalanche! In a few minutes criers were running down the streets shouting and beating gongs. People came flooding out. Carts large and small, loaded with straw, rolled towards the fields. It was like going into battle. Soon, between seventy and eighty thousand catties of straw had been delivered to the fields.

"Around midnight, when all was still, the wind died completely. The moon came out from behind the clouds and shone whitely on the countryside. Piles of straw lined the edges of the wheat fields in neat rows. From a distance, the fields looked like a large chess-board.

"Secretary Kuan had to go to a county Party committee meeting that night, so Commune Chairman Chang was in charge of the frost prevention. You needn't think just because she's a woman that our Chairman Chang isn't capable. She was a child bride in the old society. Right after liberation she began taking part in revolutionary work and was a secretary of a district Party committee. Because she's youthful looking and I'm quite tall, and we both have longish faces, everybody says we look like sisters. She didn't sleep all that night, and neither did I. I was wearing thin clothes, but she had brought a cotton padded tunic. It got very cold during the night and she said to me: 'Come on, Shu-ying, this is big enough for both of us.' We huddled together and she draped the tunic over our shoulders. We walked around the fields that way, checking up.

"We heard voices coming from behind one of the straw piles. Fan the Tease and another old man were talking. Fan was saying: 'Who knows whether there'll be any frost? But they make us come out here and do us out of our sleep! I bet we'll have to squat in these fields until dawn!'

"We were about to retort when someone stood up abruptly in the field and said in a muffled voice: 'What are you complaining about, Fan? Will you be responsible if the frost ruins the wheat?'

"It was my brother, Bronze Hammer. He always says what he thinks. The Tease didn't dare utter a peep. 'Don't fall asleep,' Chairman Chang cautioned the watchers. 'Prop your eyelids open with twigs,' she joked. 'Tomorrow you can take a holiday!' Everyone roared with laughter.

"As it began getting on towards morning, a thin grey mist covered the sky and the weather turned bitingly cold. I knew that meant the frost was coming. Out here we get frost when the temperature goes down to zero. As a rule when the mercury drops to two or three degrees, that's the time to light the smudge fires and drive off the frost.

"I kept watching the thermometer and Chairman Chang stood beside me, waiting to order the beating of the gongs. My eyes were fixed on the column of mercury. Slowly, it fell. I don't know how long I watched. My eyes were beginning to smart. The temperature dropped to five, four—it was about to hit three!

" 'Three degrees!' I shouted.

" 'Shall we beat the gongs?' Chairman Chang asked me tensely.

"But just then I felt a gentle south breeze, as soft as cotton, caress my face and the temperature stopped falling. At once it began to rise again. Hastily I yelled: 'No!' Because the minute the gongs sounded seventy or eighty thousand catties of straw would be lit. Chairman Chang came running over to look at the thermometer. 'What's happened?' she asked. 'You see,' I said, 'the temperature's rising. There probably won't be any frost.' She said: 'How dangerous! That was a close call.'

"We waited a while longer and the temperature rose still higher. I began to feel comfortably warm. I looked to the east. Ha! A flaming red sun was rising from the horizon.

"Chairman Chang beat out the signal ending the frost alert. The people in the fields immediately started swarming noisily back to the village as if they were hurrying to a temple fair. *Hai*! I never thought I'd make such

a mess of things. Everyone was talking about it on the road home. The words that stuck in my ears were:

" 'The forecast was wrong! I knew our crude weather station couldn't do the job.'

" 'If ducks could catch fish, what would you need cormorants for!'

"Some good-hearted people said: '*Ai*, she's only a slip of a girl. What did you expect?'

" 'She'd better quit making those silly forecasts. Turning the whole commune upside down!'

"The well-to-do middle peasants squawked the most. Fan the Tease deliberately twitted my brother. 'So she thinks she can take over from the Old Lord of the Sky. All she's good for is stuffing herself with muffins.'

" 'Who said we were going to have frost?' someone asked. The Tease raised his voice to make sure my brother heard: 'Hsiao Kuan's girl!'

"My brother is very hot tempered. He glared at me furiously, as if he wanted to hit me when we got home. I was walking with Orchid. I didn't dare look at him.

"Just our luck, at the edge of the village we ran into an old man. He stopped Orchid and said: 'All because of one word from you, everyone had to freeze out in the fields all night.'

"Orchid said: 'It wasn't me.'

" 'What do you mean it wasn't you? I heard you over the loudspeaker network.' Orchid had no way of explaining. Since I was right beside her, it would have been embarrassing for her to tell the true story. She left me angrily and walked on ahead.

"Now, I'm pretty stubborn. At the time I didn't shed a tear. All I thought was: 'If I was wrong, then I was

wrong. But my conscience tells me I've done nothing to be ashamed of!'

"When I got back to our meteorological office there was a roaring inside my head like a mountain torrent. A shadow darkened the doorway and came in. It was my brother, Bronze Hammer.

"He glared at me. 'Shu-ying, of all the jobs you could do, why do you have to pick weather forecasting?'

" 'The work is needed. It's the job the Party gave me!'

" 'I've got a criticism!' His voice was getting louder.

" 'If you've got a criticism, then state it!'

" 'That's a fine weather forecast you gave!'

" 'You learn from your mistakes. Nobody is born knowing how.'

" 'You've still got the nerve to argue! Our whole family has lost face on account of you! People are saying you're just trying to get out of doing physical work; they're tearing our pa to pieces!'

"That's the kind of fellow my brother is. He gets mad very easily and says anything that comes into his head. I was so angry my hands were trembling. There was no reasoning with him. I pushed him right out of the room and shouted:

" 'Mind your own business!' And I slammed the door.

"A few minutes later, the door opened gently. I looked up. It was Pa! He put two muffins and a dish of vegetables on the table and said: 'Here. You'd better eat something, Sis. You've been up all night. Have a bite to eat. I just told your brother off. I really ought to paste him a couple.'

"I seldom cry. But when I saw Pa, I don't know why, but tears began rolling down my cheeks.

" 'Don't cry,' Pa said. 'You've got to stand firm when things go wrong. Green the first time, experienced the second. Persevere. You're bound to strike water if you dig deep enough; there isn't any mountain that can't be cut through. How did Chairman Mao lead the Red Army over the snow mountains and through the swampy grasslands!' To encourage me he said: 'It seems to me you're doing pretty well. When a little girl who used to herd sheep and studied only three years in spare-time literacy classes can calculate how big a wind and how much rain we're going to have, and knows what the temperature will be too—I say that's not bad at all.'

"The more Pa talked, the harder I cried. 'Pa,' I pleaded, 'don't say any more. It's my fault for not doing a good job.'

"After he left, I still wasn't able to think the thing out. This job is too hard, I said to myself. It would be better if I went back to work in the fields. But then I thought —If I don't do this job, all the trouble the Party took to train me will be wasted. What's more, the people's communes are going in for large-scale production. They have to know the weather.

"Unable to make up my mind, I went to the Party committee office to see Chairman Chang. On the way home from the fields, she too had looked angry. At the office door I heard several voices inside talking. There was Chairman Chang, Section Chief Hsu and Secretary Kuan. It seemed that Secretary Kuan had returned from his county Party committee meeting that morning.

"Section Chief Hsu was saying: 'There are a lot of complaints against our meteorologist for making the wrong forecast. Some people claim we'd be better off without her; there'd be less trouble!'

"Secretary Kuan became angry. He said: 'What kind of people say that! Who are they? Have you investigated? The county Party committee meeting was called specially to study technological innovations and the promotion of simple mechanization on a large scale. The committee even commended us for setting up our own weather station. Put the question before the people for discussion! It's obvious there's plenty of conservative thinking around here.'

"'As a matter of fact,' said Chairman Chang, 'the forecast last night was correct. The temperature went down to three degrees, but it went right up again. That's why we didn't light the smudge fires.'

"'It seems to me the job was done pretty well,' Secretary Kuan agreed. 'We saved tens of thousands of catties of straw! On my way back from the county I saw other communes—they had all lit their fires. Think of the straw we saved. . . .'

"I didn't dare to hear any more. In the first place, it's wrong to listen in on your leaders' discussions. In the second place my tears were flowing so fast I couldn't stop them. When I got back to our weather station I felt as if I didn't have a care in the world. I had only one thought:

"'I'll work for the Party even if the sky falls!'

"I went right on with my job. I checked the wind direction, examined the formation of the clouds. . . . It certainly was a coincidence. The forecast showed frost again for the following day! This time I had no doubts. I would give honest reports, no matter what problems I might run into.

"In the afternoon Secretary Kuan and Chairman Chang came to the station. The secretary still seemed a bit

angry, and he paced the room without speaking, though he looked as if there was a lot he wanted to say. Chairman Chang asked me: 'Have you been crying, Shu-ying?'

"I hung my head and didn't answer.

"Secretary Kuan waved his hand and said: 'You have to be able to stick things out and not be afraid of trouble. Don't pay any attention to what some backward people may say. If your report was wrong last night, you just try harder the next time! Aim for a hundred per cent accuracy.'

"Secretary Kuan is very strong on principle. I knew he didn't say anything about our saving tens of thousands of catties of straw because he was afraid it would make me conceited. 'Shu-ying,' he said, 'you must continue this work. You mustn't give in.'

"I handed him my report and said: 'This is the forecast for tomorrow!' He read it, then he looked at me and nodded.

"'That's the spirit!' he said. 'So there'll be frost, eh? Are you sure?'

"'I'm sure.' I told him my reasons.

"'We'll take steps at once.'

"This time there really was a frost. It was a 'creeping frost', but because our commune took good precautions, tens of thousands of *mou* of wheat escaped unharmed."

4

Shu-ying had gone this far with her story when a young man carrying a whip entered. "Our carters' brigade has to go to Hsuchang to pick up some chemical fertilizer,"

he said to her. "Is it going to rain? If it is, we'll take tarpaulins."

Shu-ying led him outside to talk. We remained in the meteorology office. That was when we noticed a poster on the wall. It was a jingle written in big characters:

Weather station of you I approve,
Without your help we can't make a move.
Staff officer to the production command,
In the conquest of nature you as sentinel stand.
Your eyes can see a thousand *li* high,
Right through the clouds way into the sky.
You can summon the rain or call the wind into play,
You know whether dark or bright will be the day.
As long as we listen to your words so clever,
We're sure of a harvest bigger than ever.

While we were reading it Shu-ying returned, and we asked her: "Who wrote that poster?"

She laughed. "My brother, Bronze Hammer! He's the fellow who just asked me whether it's going to rain. We're on very good terms now, but last year he didn't believe in any of this. Let me tell you how he came to write the jingle poster.

"After we licked the frost, the Party committee kept a close eye on our weather station. It gave us the slogan: 'With the Party secretary in command, combine local and modern methods; improve by your own efforts; strive for accuracy.' I did a lot of educational work among the people, explaining about the weather, and another girl was assigned to help me. All the production brigade leaders were ordered to learn some meteorology. Tests were

given at regular intervals to all of them, including my brother.

"Combining local and modern methods was very effective. The old folk in our commune are a mine of information. The Party committee issued formal invitations, asking them to become advisors to the meteorological station. I didn't understand why, at first. But after I had collected a lot of the old saws from them, I realized how important this method was.

"Take Grandpa Po for instance. This year, he's ninety-seven. I learned a couple of hundred proverbs from him alone. Like: 'When Jade Mountain wears a foggy cap, the hired hand can take a nap.' Or 'When the clouds move east, a wind will take shape; when the clouds move west, better wear your rain cape.' Or 'Pink clouds in morning, don't leave your door; pink clouds at dusk, go a thousand *li* or more.' Or 'Rainbow in the east, you'll soon see the sun again; rainbow in the west, we'll have some more rain.' Or 'Broom-tail clouds high up in the sky, big rain coming before three days go by.' Or 'Thunder in the morning, rain gone before noon hour; thunder at night, a ten-day shower' . . . and many more. I picked up all these peasant sayings from the old people in our commune.

"After we accumulated this valuable experience, our weather station changed. Under Secretary Kuan's guidance, we analysed and weeded through the local sayings, comparing them with standard scientific rules. For example, those 'broom-tail clouds' I just mentioned — in the textbooks they're called 'bean-sprout clouds' — if you see them when the sun is going down behind the mountains, it's sure to rain within three days.

"As a result of combining local and modern methods, our confidence soared. We became more and more ac-

curate. Gradually we were able to predict the weather three, five, and even ten days in advance.

"When the wheat was ripe, Secretary Kuan called us in and said: 'This year the wheat has all ripened at the same time. It's a fine crop. If we're to snatch it out of the mouth of the rain dragon, the weather station will have to do a good job.' We said: 'No doubt about it. We give you our guarantee.'

"Our wheat grew beautifully last year — high as a man. Each head had four rows of grain, round and fat as pomegranate seeds. Our commune plants mostly 'Pima Number One' wheat. The husks of that strain are rather loose. They drop off easily — especially in a wind. During the harvest, we worked in the fields, keeping one eye cocked at the sky. At night we didn't dare sleep. If there was any wind, we were to telephone the Party committee promptly.

"The fourth day of the harvest, when the emulation among the teams and brigades was at its height, we noticed some signs of rain. There were three arrow-shaped clouds in the sky when the sun sank behind the hills. One of our local proverbs says: 'At sunset time see clouds of arrow, rain will follow on the morrow.' When we got back to the station we looked at the leech in the jar. It had floated up from the bottom and was trying to jump out of the water. Then we checked the moisture in the air and the wind velocity. Our first decision was that it would rain the following afternoon.

"At that time, the cut wheat was all heaped in the fields. Very little of it had been sent to the threshing ground. If it rained, the wheat kernels would be soaked and start to sprout. We hurried to report to the Party committee.

"The leaders of the committee thought that if they stopped the harvesting, the loss would be serious. Besides, the weather was beautiful, without a cloud in the sky. Secretary Kuan was very conscientious. He went back with us to the station and checked each instrument personally. Then he took us up the mountain slope to the pasture, to see Grandpa Chao.

"Grandpa Chao is one of our weather advisors. He's been herding sheep on the mountain slopes for more than fifty years. His experience is very rich! We found him at dusk. He was just bringing the sheep down the mountain.

" 'Is it going to rain tomorrow, Old Chao?' Secretary Kuan asked him. The old man looked at us, then squatted down without a word and turned over a stone. 'It's going to rain.' He pointed at the underside of the stone. 'You see. That stone is sweating.' He plucked a stalk of *chieh-chieh* grass and examined it. 'The *chieh-chieh* grass is turning white. That means rain.'

" 'When should we expect it?' asked Secretary Kuan.

"Grandpa Chao laughed and glanced at me. 'Can't say exactly. From the way these sheep are gorging themselves on grass and don't want to go down the slope, my guess is there'll be rain tomorrow.'

"Making a note of what the old man said, Secretary Kuan became very tense. He practically flew down the slope. We couldn't keep up with him. Back at commune headquarters, he immediately called a council of war. An hour later, an order was issued over the loudspeaker network for all teams and brigades to stop reaping. They were to concentrate all their forces on moving the cut wheat out of the fields and threshing it that same night.

"When this directive reached my brother's youth brigade, they didn't like it much. They had been pushing to be the first to finish reaping, and they had only a few dozen *mou* left. If it weren't for the order to stop they could have got all their wheat cut that same night. Actually they weren't doing so well, because the grain they had reaped was piled up all over their field.

"We were helping their brigade when the order came over the loudspeaker system. Bronze Hammer rushed up to me and yelled: 'How can it rain in weather like this, Shu-ying? There isn't a cloud in the sky. Where's the rain going to come from?'

"I ignored him. I knew he'd have to carry out the directive. Just then Secretary Kuan and Chairman Chang came along on a tour of inspection. When Secretary Kuan saw that my brother's brigade still hadn't moved their wheat, he said reprovingly: 'Bronze Hammer, you'd better get that wheat out of here before the rain starts.'

"'It can't rain in weather like this, Secretary,' my brother argued. 'There's not a sign of rain anywhere.' He was still dilly-dallying.

"'Stop reaping immediately,' Secretary Kuan said shortly. 'By the time you see the rain, it'll be too late. All of you start finding ways right now to get that cut wheat home in a hurry. This is an order!'

"Bronze Hammer pulled a long face and gave me a sulky look, but I pretended not to see him. That night, as I helped the youth brigade stack and thresh the grain, he said to me: 'We can get along fine without a busybody like you!'

"I paid no attention.

"The next morning, having worked all night, I was fast asleep when he came bursting into my room. 'Get up,

Shu-ying,' he shouted, 'and take a look at your rain! You've delayed the commune's reaping a whole day. That's nothing to be sneezed at!'

"'It isn't time yet,' I said. 'It'll rain when the time comes.' He kept ranting and raging. Ma had to shoo him out of my room.

"After breakfast, the sky was still a beautiful clear blue. Bronze Hammer began complaining again in the courtyard, not to me directly, but deliberately loud to let me hear. 'Where's the rain?' he demanded. 'All that labour power wasted a whole day—who's going to be responsible!' That's the kind of fellow my brother is. He can't stand being idle a single minute, and he's very concerned about our commune's production. I knew there was no use talking to him when he was so worked up. He was only looking for an excuse to argue with me. I had no intention of poking that hornets' nest. Anyhow, he'd understand soon. In the meantime I just ignored him!

"Just then the telephone in the front room rang. Our front room is the office of the youth production brigade. It was commune headquarters calling. I stood listening in the doorway. It turned out that Secretary Kuan was giving Bronze Hammer a 'test'! He wanted my brother to tell him the day's weather. Bronze Hammer got all in a flap. He didn't remember many of the details. 'Ah . . . it's going to rain,' he said. 'How big a rain? . . . The wind? . . .'

"He was stamping his foot and signalling frantically with his hand for me to tell him. I said, 'Light breeze from the east, followed by moderate rain in the afternoon.' He repeated my words. Secretary Kuan told him that the whole commune was to turn out that morning for a rush job of planting sweet potatoes. This was a good

chance to plant without having to water, because heaven was going to do the job for us in the afternoon!

"Bronze Hammer couldn't see that at all. 'But what if it doesn't rain?' he protested. 'The potato sprouts will shrivel up in the sun and die!'

"Secretary Kuan said we knew what we were doing. If you had a good grasp of the Old Lord of the Sky's business, you could make intelligent use of it. Our way of planting the sweet potatoes would save both labour and water.

"That morning, our commune planted six thousand *mou* of sweet potatoes. My brother also joined in the work, but he couldn't stop worrying, and he kept on grumbling. At noon, he couldn't eat his lunch. He would look up at the sky, then look over at the sweet potatoes. He was like an ant on a hot griddle. Just then, my sister-in-law came in.

" 'Our brigade hasn't given us any work for this afternoon,' she said to Bronze Hammer, 'I'm thinking of visiting my ma. The only thing is, I'm afraid it'll rain. What do you think?'

" 'Rain, my eye!' said my brother. 'Don't you see that big sun in the clear sky? You're getting so you won't even eat a meal without checking the farmers' almanac first!'

" 'But the weather station says it's going to rain.'

" 'What do you want to listen to them for? Just go ahead.'

"My sister-in-law went into the house and changed into her new clothes and put on a pair of snowy white new cloth shoes. After she had decked herself out all sleek and shiny, she started for her mother's village, a package wrapped in red silk tucked under her arm. My brother also left with a set of buckets hanging from the ends of

a carrying-pole. He was going to the pond for water to irrigate the sweet potatoes!

"He had just brought the first load to the field when an anvil-shaped cloud appeared in the sky. Some people call them 'flying horse clouds', but because they're shaped like anvils, we've named them 'rainsmith shops'. They're the fastest and most violent rainmakers. Suddenly the wind began to moan and great pillars of rain sloshed down as if the sky were emptying.

"The buckets dancing on the ends of his shoulder pole, my brother came dashing back. He just reached the shelter of the compound gateway when my sister-in-law, soaking wet, also came running home. Her new white shoes were a muddy mess, and her brand-new clothes were plastered to her body. She began punching my brother and yelling:

" 'You said it wouldn't rain! You said it wouldn't rain!'

"My brother was no longer angry. He only fended her off and said soothingly: 'Cut it out. Our commune's six thousand *mou* of sweet potatoes are going to live! That's more important than your new shoes!'

"Ever since then, my brother's had a lot of respect for weather forecasting. He was very helpful to us during the dry spell. That was when he wrote that poster. When he brought it over, he said: 'Shu-ying, our youth production brigade presents this to the weather station as a commendation for your work.'

" 'You shouldn't compliment us,' I said. 'If it weren't for the Party and the people, a couple of young girls like us couldn't accomplish anything.'

"And that's the honest truth. The Party deserves all the credit. If it weren't for the Party, how would we know about combining local and modern methods, or about following the mass line? It's only today that we realize

how important these things are. The more folks praise us, the more modestly we rely on the leadership of the Communist Party.

"The day after Bronze Hammer put up the poster, we wrote a slogan and pasted it on the opposite wall." Shu-ying pointed to an inscription on the wall of the east side of the room. It read:

"Firmly rely on the Party's leadership and obey the Party's instructions."

5

The little meteorology office was very clean and simple. Below the slogan were two large windows which opened out, their square lattice frameworks covered with pure white paper. On the large central square of each of the windows, a pink paper cut-out of attractive folk design had been pasted.

The design was quite intricate. It showed a writhing rain dragon pulling a big plough over clouds floating in the heavens. Behind the plough was a smiling girl, driving the dragon with a whip.

Looking at the paper-cut, we admired its excellence. "Wonderful," we said. "Who did it?"

Shu-ying laughed and blushed. "I cut it myself, just for fun!" And she added: "Nearly all the women around here know how to make paper-cuts for windows. The ones my ma made were so good she was able to sell them at the fair. They were famous. But they were always scenes from the old operas."

"This one is certainly a new idea," we said.

"It's not so new," she replied. "Last year one of our local people made up a rhyme with a line in it about:

'. . . leading the rain dragon along by the nose.' We've even experimented here with man-made rain. It's not so hard to do." She began telling us how they fought the drought the year before. "That was a big battle," Shu-ying said. "And it really proved the strength of the people's communes.

"Our drought last year, according to meteorological records, was the worst in these parts in a hundred years. When our Party committee received a telegram from the provincial authorities warning that there probably would be no rain for a hundred days, Secretary Kuan and Chairman Chang were unable to eat with anxiety. But the following day, the Party committee came to a decision. All forty thousand members of the commune were summoned to a mass rally. Secretary Kuan made a speech. He said:

" 'Comrades, the Old Lord of the Sky is challenging us to war. But we're not afraid. We've got the leadership of the Party and Chairman Mao, we've got our people's commune, and we've got the water conservation projects we built during the big leap forward. We'll fight the drought till heaven bends its head. We swear to win a bumper autumn harvest! . . .'

"That night, all the members of the Party committee set out for the various production brigade headquarters, their packs upon their backs. Secretary Kuan went directly to the fields. On the tenth of June we started our general offensive against the drought. Water windlasses, irrigation ditches, donkey engines, pumps, bucket trolleys — all went into operation. Everywhere, water was moving. The villages were empty, but the fields were crowded with people.

"Our weather station was shifted to the top of Double Mountain Dam. In addition to our forecasting we became responsible, with Orchid and a few others, for the irrigation of ten *mou* of rice paddy. The first day, Secretary Kuan called us together for a meeting. He pointed down at the new rice fields our commune had opened at the foot of the dam.

" 'Those eighty thousand *mou* are the very life of our commune,' he said. 'If we can lick the drought and harvest the rice, we won't have to worry about food or fodder. If the drought beats us, well, the problem will be very serious. We're far from the main traffic arteries. It won't be easy getting grain shipped in from the outside. The best thing is for our commune to pool all its forces and make sure we have a good rice harvest. It doesn't matter so much if we lose any of our other crops. The rice is our main responsibility.'

"Then he added: 'You station people have only one duty: Forecast the weather and the moisture content of the soil accurately. You must do your job responsibly, practically, with no fuzziness about anything. We're fighting a deadly battle here.'

"Secretary Kuan didn't talk much, but whatever he said sank deep into our minds. That's the way we young country people are. A lot of oratory doesn't get much response out of us. But if you just show us clearly and simply where our duty lies, nothing can daunt us — the tougher the situation, the harder we work. We said: 'We guarantee to be good assistants to the Party. We'll report the temperature and the soil moisture content twice a day. We won't let one drop of water go to waste.'

"In the next few days we invented an 'earth-baker' to measure the moisture content of the soil, and a hair hygrometer to measure the moisture of the air. We made them all ourselves. At that time we had about forty million cubic metres of water in our Double Mountain and Lower Flat reservoirs. According to our calculations if we used it well we had enough to irrigate our eighty thousand *mou* of rice paddy three times, even if we didn't get a drop of rain.

"With every member of the commune pitching in, we fought the drought for forty-seven consecutive days. Some of our wells went dry, and so did several of our streams, but the people's spirits kept rising all the time. And when the city sent us a big pump and a generator, everyone's confidence became stronger than ever.

"On the twenty-fifth of July our weather forecast showed that the following day would be cloudy. All our previous announcements had been clear, clear, nothing but clear! We were sick of saying it, and the people were sick of hearing it. So it was really a pleasure to be able to predict a cloudy day over the loudspeaker network. The evening of the twenty-fifth, the county meteorological station sent us an urgent forecast for the coming week. It read: 'Attention, entire county. A heavy rainstorm will break the night of the twenty-sixth.'

"When word got around that a storm was coming, everyone nearly danced for joy. But I was troubled, because the forecast of our commune station showed no rain for either the twenty-sixth or the twenty-seventh. When we sent our report to Secretary Kuan, he didn't have it announced right away. Instead he came to our weather station with Section Chief Hsu.

" 'No rain in our forecast, eh?' he asked us.

" 'That's right. There's not enough moisture in the air. Besides, there's going to be a west wind tomorrow

night. We can't have rain here with the wind blowing from the west.'

" 'You can't be positive,' said Section Chief Hsu. 'Even with a west wind, sometimes it rains. My idea is to let everyone take a rest tomorrow. It's probably going to rain.'

"Secretary Kuan disagreed. 'This is no small matter,' he said. 'If we let the people's enthusiasm cool, it might take several days to rouse it to this pitch again.' Turning to us, he said: 'You continue with your calculations. Get proof from as many sources as possible. Talk things over with those advisors of yours. Check the facts carefully; be positive. I don't want to hear you using the word "probably".'

"The next morning, sure enough, the sky was cloudy with a heavy overcast. We had been checking the temperature and the wind direction all night. Now some of the well-to-do middle peasants started raising a rumpus. 'It's going to rain, you can see it in the sky,' yelled Fan the Tease. 'We ought to rest. Watering the fields is just a waste of water and effort. The Old Lord of the Sky is going to bow his head.'

"His complaints made everybody uneasy. My brother looked up at the black clouds overhead and he also began to wonder. He came and asked me about them. I told him it wasn't going to rain, to keep on fighting the drought. He went back to the fields and called a discussion meeting and had a hot argument with Fan the Tease. By then the sky was darker than before. Thunder kept rolling and booming. That afternoon I climbed Jade Mountain to see Grandpa Chao. He laughed and said: 'I knew you were coming.'

" 'Grandpa Chao,' I asked, 'what do you think? Is it going to rain?'

"He said: 'Of course! But probably not in these parts. It depends on what kind of wind rises. If it's from the east, then we'll have rain. If it's from the west, the storm won't be able to reach us, because Jade Mountain will block it. It'll just veer off the mountain's north face.'

" 'How many times have you seen a situation like this?' I asked him.

"He smiled. 'I've scores of years of experience. Whenever we have weather like this, I just herd my sheep to a sheltered spot at the foot of the cliff. All that's coming is a dry wind.'

"Hearing him say this, I felt much surer of our forecast. I went back and carefully analysed the weather reports from three different provinces, then went through our own records. I again checked the direction and velocity of the wind and the moisture in the air, noting the changes in the cloud formations. I reviewed every bit of information we had. The conclusion still was no rain for our area, only a strong wind. By then the sky was already black, with inky clouds racing across the heavens like wild horses. It was growing very dark. The crash of thunder seemed to rise up from beneath our feet. Flash after flash of lightning split the sky.

"I made up my mind. It could thunder and lightning all it liked. I had my proofs. I wasn't afraid. I would go to the Party committee and report!

"An oil lamp had already been lit in the committee office. I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sight that met me when I entered the room. Secretary Kuan, Chairman Chang and Secretary Liu were all standing around

not uttering a word, their foreheads beaded with sweat, as if something terrible had happened!

"Comrade Wang of the county water conservation bureau, was there too. 'According to our calculations,' he was saying, 'the storm will arrive late tonight or early tomorrow morning. The heavy rain will create mountain torrents which will endanger the entire county. For safety's sake, the water conservation bureau thinks it best that all water presently stored in the reservoirs be released first.'

"'Release the water!' The phrase struck me like a thunderbolt. How could we let the water out of our reservoirs? Then Secretary Kuan spoke. He said: 'Our water is as precious as gold. Every bowl of water will mean a bowl of grain. We've got tens of thousands of *mou* under irrigation here, and they depend entirely on the water from our two reservoirs. That water is of tremendous importance to our whole commune!'

"'I know the hard work you've all put into building those two reservoirs,' said Comrade Wang sympathetically. 'And this year you've got water in them for the first time. Of course you hate to let it go. We can understand that. But we can't risk big things for the sake of the small. This is a directive of the county government. I'm here to see that it's carried out.'

"'It doesn't matter if we release the water today,' said Section Chief Hsu confidently. 'It's going to rain tomorrow. Our reservoirs will fill up again.'

"'But according to our weather station,' said Secretary Kuan, 'the storm isn't going to reach us here.'

"Section Chief Hsu pointed at the sky outside and said: 'Anyone can see that it's going to rain in a minute!' As he was speaking, thunder pealed and lightning flashed! One of our other comrades said: 'I think

we'd better obey the county's order. The responsibility's too heavy.'

"Section Chief Hsu agreed. 'These two reservoirs of ours are above the county seat. If there are mountain torrents, the dams' overflowing will be the least of it. But what if the county town is flooded! I say we must carry out the directive.'

"I couldn't restrain myself any longer. I said: 'Our meteorology station has just made another careful check, Section Chief Hsu. We're positive it isn't going to rain here!'

"'This storm is spread over a wide area,' said Comrade Wang. 'It's not restricted to our county alone.'

"Secretary Kuan rose to his feet. 'I'll ask the county Party committee again,' he said firmly. 'I'll explain the whole situation and ask the committee to decide.' He was reaching for the phone when a big man entered the room. We all turned to look. It was Secretary Lin of the county Party committee!

"'Why, Secretary Lin!' everyone cried happily. Secretary Kuan laughed. 'I was just about to telephone you for instructions—'

"'It's about letting the water out of your reservoirs,' Secretary Lin cut in. 'I know all about it. I've been up on your dams, looking around. The people are very hesitant. They don't want to let the water go. The situation is this—' His voice became grave. 'A big storm is going to hit every county in the province. There's no question about that. You don't want to release the water. That's all right too. The specific conditions ought to be considered in each case. But you must have proof. You can't be careless. This is no ordinary problem.'

"How clearly and to the point Secretary Lin talked! As he spoke my heart was pounding. Outside, the thunder was louder than ever, and streaks of lightning followed one after another. Orchid, who was standing beside me, turned pale.

"Come what may, I said to myself, you've only got to remember one thing: Base your actions on the facts; dare to speak and dare to take responsibility! I had learned a bit about meteorology. The Party had trained me as a weather forecaster. If I didn't give true forecasts what was the use of the training? Besides, that water in our two reservoirs wasn't just water, it was golden shining grains of rice!

"Secretary Kuan called to me then: 'Where's Shuying?' I pushed forward through the group around him. 'Here I am!' I said. 'Tell Secretary Lin your station's weather forecast again!' he directed.

"My tunic was drenched with sweat, probably because I was so upset. I hadn't realized it myself, but Secretary Lin noticed it at once. '*Aiya,*' he said. 'Sit down, sit down and relax. Your tunic's all wet.' He poured me a bowl of water and said with a smile: 'Now, let's hear about it. Don't be nervous.'

"I plunged right in! I said: 'Secretary Lin, according to our calculations, there's not going to be much rain here. In the first place, there isn't enough moisture in the air. Secondly, storm clouds from the west under three thousand metres are blocked by Jade Mountain and veer off its north face. Thirdly, according to old peasant experience and our own records of six previous storms, eighty per cent of the summer rains driven by northwest winds never reach this southern side of the mountain. Fourthly, we're a mountainous region here, and we're on

the border of three provinces. The usual forecasts don't necessarily apply here. Besides, our temperature and wind velocity instruments prove that we're not going to have any rain — only a big wind!'

"I said all this very fast, as if I had memorized it. Orchid told me later I sounded like an actress on the stage. I looked at Secretary Lin. He was listening very carefully. As I was talking, outside there was a heavy rumble of thunder and raindrops spattered against the window.

"Section Chief Hsu yelled: 'It's raining! It's raining!'

"'Don't lose your head,' Secretary Lin said quietly. 'When the thunder is big the rain is small.' Hearing these words I felt as if a weight had been lifted from my heart!

"Comrade Wang of the Water Conservation Bureau said to me: 'You claim it won't rain here. But what if it does? Are you prepared to take the responsibility?'

"'If our forecast is wrong, I'm willing to accept any punishment that's given me.'

"Secretary Lin suddenly rose to his feet. He said: 'She's already assumed full responsibility.' Then he addressed the others: 'It seems to me that this little girl has good reasons for her forecast. She's investigated, she's analysed. It's precisely this matter that's brought me here. On the way, I also investigated. I questioned a dozen old peasants. Nine of them said it wouldn't rain here. One of them said — "When the thunder god sings his song, even if it rains it's not for long." It seems to be a case of "summer rains barely wet the ox's back," as the peasants put it. Well, what are we going to do? My idea is not to release the water at the moment, but

to place some strong young men on the dams to be ready for any emergency, with a good leader in command. Any objections?'

"'No objections!' The shouted response drowned out the booming thunder! 'I'll take charge on the dams tonight!' said Secretary Kuan. We all draped our tunics over our shoulders and went outside.

"The sky was pitch black by then. You couldn't even see the person ahead of you. The wind was howling madly, as if it were quarrelling with the big trees. Secretary Kuan picked forty young stalwarts from my brother's youth production brigade and posted them by the sluice gates of the dams. If there was any word of mountain torrents coming down, they were to open the gates immediately and let our water out.

"By the time everything was ready, it was well past midnight. Secretary Kuan told us to go to sleep, but when we saw that he and the other secretaries were staying up all night and the battle was so tense, how could we? I remembered there was still something I had to do—go up Jade Mountain! Up on top, if any storm clouds got by, I could give the warning.

"Wrapping my tunic tightly around me, I bent my head and pushed through the wind up the slope. Climbing Jade Mountain ordinarily wasn't hard, but the night was black as ink and the big wind seemed determined to knock me over and not let me go up.

"When I reached the summit, the wind was even stronger, and thunder shook the mountain as if trying to topple it. In a flash of lightning, I could see the north side. A white sea of misty clouds, like ten thousand galloping horses, rolled east along the Tan River. Several times the wind blew the clouds in our direction, but Jade Mountain stuck out its big pot belly and shoved them back. Lightning, thunder, wind and rain whirled about the sky like a whole stage full of fighting warriors. It was so beautiful, I forgot to be scared. I picked up a lot of valuable meteorological information that night.

"Just before dawn there was a flurry of large raindrops. But they only moistened the ground, then stopped. I went back to the top of the dam. Blue sky was already showing in the north. Secretary Kuan and my brother and the others were turning the windlass to raise the sluice gate. But they weren't letting all the water out. Since we hadn't had any rain from the sky we were making our own—releasing some of the clear spring water to irrigate our commune's eighty thousand *mou* of rice, growing so lush and dense that not even a breeze could slip through.

"We didn't have a single good rain right up until the autumn harvest. But our people's commune in a blazing rush of activity brought our crop in and threshed it just the same. We averaged four hundred and seventy catties of rice grain per *mou* for those eighty thousand *mou*. This not only gave us enough food grain for all of our commune's forty thousand members, as well as seed grain and fodder, but four big trucks were busy a whole month delivering the surplus we sold to the state. The Old Lord of the Sky had challenged us to battle but he lost!"

August 23, 1960

About the Author

Li Chun was born in 1928 in a village near Loyang, Honan Province, into the family of a small shopkeeper. After five years of schooling in his village, he worked two years as an apprentice. Following the liberation of Loyang in 1949 he worked first in a bank and later taught Chinese in a school for cadres.

He began writing short stories on rural life in his spare-time and in 1952 some of these were published, which found many keen readers among the peasants. Since then he has written some 50 short stories and medium-length novels besides six film scenaries. Li Chun is now a member of the Union of Chinese Writers.

不能走那条路
（李准短篇小説选集）

李准 著

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